

# Community Engagement: The Magic Potion

Garan N B\*

Multicultural Communities Council Gold Coast, Queensland, Australia

## Abstract

The concept of the term community is not unique to developing or developed countries. The principles and practice associated with engaging a community are transferable from one context to the next. The culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) population in Australia is increasing and ever changing. This reality is placing pressures on the current health care system to be in tune with the needs of this CALD group. Similarly, thus is challenging existing practices to be more cost effective, appropriate and sustainable.

Partnership, collaboration and participation are vital to the success and sustainability of any project. By comparing community engagement in a developing country (Kingdom of Tonga) and a developed country (Gold Coast, Australia) the author will compare and contrast practices and principles of working in small scale community projects using participatory approaches. This paper will explore the benefits of and strategies for engaging communities and relevant stakeholders across a variety of sectors to identify community needs, develop sustainable, relevant and appropriate resources, and evaluate and plan for future engagement.

## Keywords

Principles, practices, process, CALD, community

## Introduction

*Double, double, toil and trouble*

*Fires burn and cauldrons bubble*

*But before I tell you what's in the potion*

*Lets talk about the community engagement notion!*

## What is a community?

In debating rooms across Australia, young secondary students are asked to debate the topic "that Australia has no sense of community". On the affirmative side it is argued that Australia is a land of many cultures and multiculturalism is described as being made up of many cultures and in turn communities (DIMIA 2003). From the opposition it is argued that Australia has no sense of community, that it is imperialist, and supports and promotes individualism, some may even argue that this is a downfall of "this lucky country" (DIMIA 2003). In a sense both sides of the debate are correct to some degree, and it is often that the simple meaning of the term community is not defined and assumed to be a word understood in the same way by all. When asking any group

whether it be in Australia or overseas, the word community conjures up images of family and laughter, togetherness and closeness, sharing food, clothing, dancing and culture.

It was interesting throughout my experience in Australia and overseas when I asked people from different cultures in different countries and from different age groups about the term community the various answers all came down to one explanation: The concept of community is essentially described as a group of people with something in common at a certain place in time. People can belong to more than one community at a time. Community is not limited to living in one place though this is often the most common association with 'community', or alternatively it is associated with people of the same culture collectively forming their own community (Kniepmann cited in Christiansen and Baum 1997). It must be remembered that one may be part of a community intermittently such as at a football game when supporters of one team support each other, share their experience, food, and culture. All participants at this conference may form their own community as they share a common interest and common ground at a particular place in time. We could all classify ourselves as an international community of 'engagers' perhaps, and as such, we are the ones who know about our community at this place and time.

### **What does engagement mean?**

Engagement can be defined as the act of charming, attracting, holding the attention of or to undertake an exercise for a project/program (Dutch 1983; Fowler and Fowler 1964), hence when a community is being engaged they are directing their attention and focus towards something that is important to them. Community engagement occurs when the community appoint themselves to be responsible for achieving their desired outcome or vision (Ife 1999).

If we take the example of this conference group being a community, it would therefore be important to us for others to recognise and understand that when trying to engage with us in dialogue, work or through other mediums it is important to relate to and understand us in order to optimise the outcomes of the engagement. The various stakeholders (conference organisers, presenters, panellists and participants) view the process from different perspectives and want to achieve the same outcome, they each have input at different stages, with the ultimate outcome being the conference itself.

### **But how do we really engage with the community? How should we go about it?**

In order to approach a community group appropriately it is important to understand the principles and practices of community engagement. Though some may view the following to be quite common sense, it is often overlooked for a more complicated and tiresome approach to working with communities. Before we look at the principles and practices of community engagement, I will share with you the background to my experience in community. I was invited to work on one project in the Kingdom of Tonga and another project on the Gold Coast, Queensland. In both instances my role was essentially the same and had been assigned to me primarily by the

community. Although they were two different projects, in two different countries and two different environments I was seen as the person who had access to resources and skills that were needed to assist the communities to turn their visions into a reality.

It is important to note at this point that the scope of this paper looks at small-scale community projects. As such, governments role may vary within community projects, taking either an active role within the process or more of a reporting agency as did the governments that are referred to in this paper, ensuring that the scope of the projects were within the guidelines set for the provision of funding.

### **The principles of community engagement (*Foundations of the Potion*)**

The ideology underpinning community engagement is simple enough:

- The people who make up the community, know the community
- A community has many complicated structures which are often difficult to explain but are important to understand
- Communities are creative and capable of empowering themselves (Kenny 1999). This may at times be achieved in the presence of an external facilitator who can work with the community to identify the resources or knowledge to know where to start. This facilitator may also assist the community to network with the funding body, e.g. government to ensure that a broad range of issues is being considered which may impact upon the community.
- People invited into a community as a resource have a facilitatory role. When they learn from and with the community they will have a greater appreciation of the complex and diverse ways systems work
- Community engagement is when decisions are made by those whose lives are impacted on by the decision. This includes all stakeholders — community, government, funding bodies, etc.
- Community engagement can generate information from and about a community in a cost-effective and timely way
- Communities are rich with knowledge, skills and experience, they know best about their community and lives
- Working with communities involves trial and error
- Open-mindedness, flexibility and adaptability are crucial skills for community engagement
- Sometimes your own values and beliefs can facilitate or alternatively inhibit community engagement, sometimes this line is very fine
- Community engagement needs to be meaningful and relevant to the community
- Community engagement is culturally and contextually determined
- Community engagement relies on active participation of all community members. In reality, all community members may not be able to participate. It is therefore important that the members engaged are a true cross-section of the community and respect still be given to members who choose not to participate in the process.

- Community engagement is an evolving process and allowances need to be made for things to change and adapt but a realistic timeframe must be considered in the process (Yea 2001; Chambers 1999; Kenny 1999; Pretty et al. 1995).

Whilst we allow for the principles of community engagement to marinade for a while let me give you a brief overview of the outcomes and visions of the two projects within which I worked. As an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development I was invited to work for 12 months in the Kingdom of Tonga where I worked with a local counterpart, Dorothy Fauonuku, from the Salvation Army's Alcohol and Drug Awareness Centre on health promotion activities for young people in the areas of drugs, alcohol and sexual health. This was done by collaborating with other organisations and communities on the islands using participatory approaches to develop options for developing healthy lifestyle opportunities. This was seen as being necessary as the effects of western culture were impacting greatly on the lifestyles of young people in the Kingdom.

On the Gold Coast, I was assigned the role of project officer to work for the Multicultural Communities Council Gold Coast to develop a tool to meet the needs of regional health care workers in the aged care industry whose clients were from culturally and linguistically diverse (CALD) backgrounds. Over a 12-month period, this project required extensive research of existing resources and the identification and implementation of the vision set by the community of health workers. With the increasing population of people from CALD backgrounds settling on the Gold Coast and accessing aged care services, this project was to meet the gaps in knowledge and skills of the workers to competently work with this population.

Now that we have found the recipe and gathered all the ingredients (principles of community engagement) together, let's look at the steps or processes of community engagement.

As an occupational therapist I was trained to use the problem solving process (Twible et al. 1998) to develop solutions to meet an identified outcome or vision. This problem solving process is supported by the AusAID (2004) guidelines and thus the following community engagement process was used:

1. Identify visions/outcomes and priorities
2. Research undertaken on existing resources and skills and additional resources and skills needed
3. Action plans were determined
4. Timelines set
5. Implementation of the action plan
6. Monitoring
7. Evaluation of project
8. Planning for the future.

To explain each of these steps, the following table outlines the process in each of the experiences mentioned previously and compares and contrasts the process in each case. Underpinning the process are the principles as outlined earlier.

	<b><i>Community Engagement in the Kingdom of Tonga</i></b>	<b><i>Community Engagement on the Gold Coast</i></b>
<b>Definition of the community</b>	Young People and youth organisations	Health care workers
<b>My role</b>	Facilitate a number of community activities where young people could make positive healthy lifestyle choices	Create a train the trainer tool for health care workers in the aged care industry regarding working with people from CALD backgrounds
<b>Visions identified and prioritised</b>	Raise awareness of issues to do with drugs, alcohol & sexual health - Develop activities for young people to make positive lifestyle choices	Develop a tool which would be useful for ALL health care workers in the aged care industry
<b>Research on existing resources &amp; skills</b> <b>- Key stakeholders</b> <b>- Cultural broker</b>	Youth groups, funding bodies Youth representatives from youth organisations: Tonga Family Planning, Tongan National Youth Congress; Project counterpart – Dorothy Fauonuku	Health care workers, funding bodies, community organisations, people from CALD backgrounds, steering committee, health care workers, MCCGC staff
<b>Funding bodies role</b>	NGO's and Australian, New Zealand and British governments. Short term and one off funding for activities / projects. Final reports completed to rationalise use of funds	Department of Health, QLD. Ensure project addressed target populations in specific area of health – Home and Community Care (HACC) services; participate on steering committee
<b>Action plan</b>	Short term activity plans	Long term
<b>Timeline</b>	12-months in total – each activity took approx. 2 months to complete	12-months
<b>Implementation</b>	Collaborative effort between organisations to carry out various activities e.g. World Health organisation, Tongan National Youth Congress, Tonga Family Planning, Salvation Army Alcohol & Drug Awareness Centre	Develop tool for use, regular review and input from health care workers and steering committee
<b>Monitoring and Evaluation</b>	Each activity/project reviewed after completion via structured meetings	At the completion of 12months, the project was evaluated against the action plan. MCCGC to conduct 12-month post-project review in Oct 2005
<b>Planning for the future</b>	Each activity was completed and the next project was developed to build on the achieved outcomes of the previous activity.	MCCGC sought additional funding for the project to build on the outcomes/vision being reached in the future

The benefits of each engagement was that the outcome and vision were relevant to the community at that time. The community activity belonged to the people and embraced the idea.

Community engagement is necessary in all projects that relate or impact on a community. If the principles, process and practices of community engagement are used then the outcome should be cost effective. It is necessary right from onset to completion that the community is in control (Kumar 2002). For example, in the Gold Coast health workers expressed that they did not want 'another folder for the bookshelf'. The purpose of the resource tool developed in Queensland was to form the foundations needed to improve service provision to CALD clients. It was asked that this tool be produced with the option for self paced training and thus suitable for its users as well as options to add and grow the tool to adapt to their needs as they saw fit.

The facilitator assisted in whatever way was necessary to enable a successful outcome. The process of empowerment ensured sustainability of the project and has meant that the vision has developed, evolved and is continuing to grow and change with its community. We as facilitators in the community engagement process are merely a pinch of salt in the cauldron.

### **The practices of community engagement**

To ensure that you as an invited facilitator add no more than a pinch to the potion: we can apply the following practices when working within the community engagement context. The way we approach a community varies with each community — there is no formula or structure or rule as to how to engage a community, but the following are common practices as explained in the literature:

*i. Community engagement involves collaboration*

Share stories — allow the community to talk and share its story's about its people. Allow an open flow of discussion and avoid specific questions, if you go in with specific questions about something it may appear to the community that the engagement is an interrogation rather than an open discussion. In my experience in Tonga this meant holding community meetings and talks with youth representatives from youth organizations. On the Gold Coast it was talking with all levels of aged care health service providers and workers to gain a full understanding of the system and how it worked or identified where gaps existed (Pretty et al. 1995).

*ii. Community engagement is community centred and therefore facilitates empowerment and ensures sustainability (Ife 1999)*

*a. People in the community are the cooks*

Remembering that community includes all relevant stakeholders, the community should choose which ingredients are added to create the potion in order to ensure it continues through the generations and time. As the facilitator, you may have the list of all possible ingredients (resources) available for purchase, and the techniques (skills) on how to ensure the best potion is created, however the cooks ultimately have the final say. For instance, in the Gold Coast region, a cross section of the community provided information, which was compared with other

research conducted in the area to ensure consistency of information between reference groups. This triangulation process ensured the validity of the information gathered. The results were then passed on to participants and stakeholders to confirm the findings and to identify future actions. This process was cost effective in that appropriate and relevant data was gathered from, cross-checked and clarified with the community. Cultural and language barriers were considered throughout.

*b. Community engagement involves the active participation of the community in all stages of development*

It is necessary right from onset to completion that the community being engaged are in the position of power and not the facilitator. Active participation is ensured if the community are approached on its terms, in a place and time that is familiar to them and people who are part of their community surround them (Pretty et al. 1995).

*c. Facilitator's role*

One's role within the community engagement process is to be the mediator or the facilitator, creating an opportunity for dialogue to take place between the significant parties and with impartiality from the facilitator. For example, a facilitator should be able to assist a community group to identify who the key players are in the project, what information is needed to be obtained, what are the outcomes being sought? When is the most appropriate time to obtain this information as timing can make or break a project? Where is the information being obtained – is it in a place that may seem threatening to the community or is it a warm comfortable inviting place to be open and share information. How is the information going to be obtained? What is most appropriate for your community group? A casual discussion, focus group, artistic expression, agenda, questions and answer, surveys, questionnaire, as a few examples. It is crucial to always consider the literacy level of your community group, the communicative abilities of its members and the age range of those that make up that community, hence the activities used must be age appropriate (Kumar 2002)

*iii. Community engagement should be an opportunity where the community visions are identified and formalised and are reviewed and revisited constantly over the lifespan of the project (Ife 1999)*

Ensure there is enough time to conduct the engagement. People often believe that one meeting with a group will provide them with all the information that they require and this is not the case in reality.

*iv. Community engagement necessitates cross-cultural awareness and interactions between the facilitator and the community eg. Gender differences in a community*

*a. Find yourself a cultural broker*

A cultural broker is a person who is able to interpret, interact and participate in the community group, whilst also being able to explain to an outsider the complexities / dynamics of the community. This person is vital to ensure the success of an engagement, as they are the one to whom you are able to ask ALL questions regardless of how sensitive the question may be in a regular experience or interaction (Twible and Henley 1997)In most cases – work with a

community member or reference group, this ensures that you are not the primary person doing the engagement. Developing relationships with key players in the community will ensure that ownership of the community still lies with the group. If an outsider comes into a group and does not make his/her intentions known then the community may misinterpret this behaviour as being an outsider trying to take over the community which again can be very threatening and may jeopardise the engagement all together (Otero 2001).

*b. Identifies key players within that community (Kumar 2002)*

These may be the people in positions of power such as the leader, but may include people who are not in these positions, they may be younger or older members of the group, people who gossip, people who are the doer's rather than the talkers.

*c. Speak the same language as the community*

This does not necessarily mean the vernacular of the community but it includes approaching them on the same level. For example, walking into a group of children who live on the street whilst wearing a suit and tie will not truly allow for open dialogue with that group. Why? Because clothing, attitude, appearance, language will all impact on how a community perceives those who are facilitating the collection of information from that group (Otero 2001). This language that you may modify when engaging with that community needs to be genuine. The community will recognise if you are forcing your behaviour. In relation to my experience, using jargon free language and providing a creative, energetic yet comfortable learning environment ensured the communities that the engagement was familiar to them.

*d. Consider areas of concern that may exist in the community (Pretty et al. 1995)*

The information being provided or being sought will need to be contextually suited to the community. For example when wanting to discuss sexual health practices with various community groups the information is the same, but the difference lies in the way that information is delivered. As an example, depending on the sensitivities of the topic certain genders will be unable to listen to the discussion topic with the opposite gender present. A solution could be to separate into gender groups and complete an activity that is appropriate to that gender. In this way information is still being presented but in a time that is appropriate for that group as well as in an environment that is safe to allow open discussion about sensitive issues relating to eg. Sexual health, contraception and the like.

*v. Community engagement requires flexibility (Kenny 1999; Ife 1999)*

It is also imperative that the facilitator be flexible but not casual in his/her approach in order for information to be obtained. The facilitator must be mindful that the environment in which the engagement takes place must be familiar and comfortable to the community and that there are a number of activities / approaches that can be used to enable rather than inhibit dialogue from and between the community whilst respecting the individuals values and beliefs.

*a. Allow enough time for the engagement to take place.*

Engagement should occur on a number of different occasions with different people from that community. This will ensure a broad cross section of the group and therefore information obtained will be more reliable as "all sides of the story" will be heard.

vi. *Community engagement uses locally available resources and is therefore cost effective (Pretty et al. 1995)*

vii. *Follow up!*

You have entered into a community group and as such have begun to generate an open and trusting relationship with the community. Continue communication with the community because whatever the reason for engagement it was clearly something important to the lives of its members and will have an impact on the community (Chambers 1999).

## **Conclusion**

True sustainability and success of a project are reliant on the partnership, collaboration and participation of the community. The relationship when engaging a community must be of an equal status. Mutual respect for all involved must be obtained in order for the partnership to be fruitful. Similarly, collaboration is essential - open communication, clear role definition and measurable outcomes as defined by the community clearly stated from the onset of any community activity will enhance the opportunity for community driven and sustainable projects and programs. If there is true partnership and collaboration, then participation in the process should be greater as members of the community are working towards their desired outcome and vision and therefore are truly going to benefit from or contribute to something worthwhile to its people..

In summary:

**Partnership + Collaboration + Participation = Sustainability + Success**

And what's in the community engagement magic potion?

Ingredients required:

1 Community group (variable)

6 litres of participation

5 litres of partnership

5 litres of collaboration

3 cups of flexibility

2 cups of creativity and energy (pre-mixed)

Resources (that are in season)

Skills (according to taste)

A pinch of facilitator

## **References**

Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) 2004, *AusGUIDE*, viewed 5 October 2004, <<http://www.ausaid.gov.au/ausguide/>>.

Chambers R 1999, *Relaxed and Participatory Appraisal Notes on Practical Approaches and Methods*, <<http://www.ids.ac.uk/ids/particip/research/prarcwshpjun99.pdf>>.

Department of Immigration, Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2003, *Multicultural Australia: United in Diversity*, <<http://www.immi.gov.au/multicultural/australian/policy.htm>>.

Dutch R A 1983, *Roget's Thesaurus*, Penguin Books Australia Ltd., Victoria.

Fowler H W & Fowler F G (eds) 1964, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 5 edn, Oxford University Press, London.

Ife J 1999, *Community Development: Creating community alternatives — vision, analysis and practice*, Longman, Australia.

Kenny S 1999, *Developing communities for the future*, 2 edn, Nelson ITP, South Melbourne.

Kniepmann K, 1997, 'Prevention of Disability and Maintenance of Health', ch. 22 in eds C H Christiansen & C M Baum, *Occupational Therapy — Enabling Function and Well Being*, 2 edn, Slack Incorporated, New Jersey.

Kumar S 2002, *Methods for Community Participation — A complete guide for practitioners*, Vistaar Publications, New Delhi.

Otero G 2001, *What am I looking at? Teachable moments on perception, cultural awareness and understanding*, Hawker Brownlow Education, Australia.

Pretty J, Guijt I, Thompson J & Scoones I 1995, *Participatory learning and action*, International Institution for Environment and Development, London.

Twible R, Clemson L & Gamble J 1998, 'Problem solving in occupational therapy', Chapter 11, *Occupational Therapy Theory and Process 1 – Lecture series notes* available from School of Occupational Therapy and Leisure Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences, The University of Sydney, Australia.

Twible R & Henley E 1997, *Operation International Predeparture Training Program*, Available from School of Occupation and Leisure Sciences, Faculty of Health Sciences, The University of Sydney, Australia.

Yea S 2001, *SD517. Participatory approaches in development: study guide*, course material for Master of Social Science (International Development) degree, available from School of Social Science and Planning, RMIT University, City Campus, Melbourne, Victoria.