

80s, 90s and Now...Sustainable Core Values in Community Engagement from Blantyre to Brisbane

Greet P*

Manager, Brisbane Region Community Services Unit, Queensland Ambulance Service,
Australia

Abstract

Innovative solutions, people's participation, working together, listening to others... these are words from the lexicon of community engagement. Such phrases echo dialogues from the 1980s between humanitarian development agencies from Australia, the United States and Europe and their local partner agencies around the globe.

In 1987 this presenter shared a platform debating durable solutions and improving models for the delivery of practical support to refugees with UNHCR's Sergio Viera di Mello at a Sydney forum during National Refugee Week. At that time many NGOs engaged in assisting refugees around the globe, including Austcare, Australia's specialist refugee agency, were arguing that without authentic consultation, effective models for the delivery of basic needs would elude us.

Through the ensuing dialogue between UNHCR and the NGOs, better ways of engaging the affected populations, of effectively consulting with the displaced people themselves were identified. This dialogue culminated in the adoption by UNHCR of POP — People Oriented Planning — a framework taking account of the needs of women, men and children in planning the delivery of assistance to refugees and displaced people.

Through an analysis of the text of key documents describing the POP Framework, and Queensland's Community Engagement Strategy, a comparison of core principles was achieved. This exploration of similarities and difference stimulates our thinking as practitioners about:

- what is community engagement and why is it important
- what is the values base we are working from
- how those values manifest in our everyday work practice.

Keywords

Planning, consultation, refugees, values, practice

Introduction

Innovative solutions, people's participation, working together, listening to others... these are words from the current lexicon of community engagement that is used here in Brisbane, Queensland. Such phrases echo dialogues from the 1980s between humanitarian development agencies from Australia, the United States and Europe and their local partner agencies around the globe, and particularly in Africa, India and Latin America.

In 1987 the author shared a platform with United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) then Director of NGO Liaison, Sergio Viera di Mello, at a Sydney forum during National Refugee Week debating durable solutions and improving models for the delivery of practical support to refugees. Our focus was on the millions of displaced people who were being assisted in rural temporary settlements across southern Africa: almost a million in Malawi, tens of thousands more in Zambia, Zimbabwe, Lesotho, Angola and, of course, millions more again who had fled fighting and starvation in Sudan, Ethiopia, Eritrea. Many of these were well established communities albeit in makeshift and temporary tent villages and cities that had sprung up along the borders of these countries as large numbers of people fled across borders for the relative safety and protection offered in neighbouring countries.

At that time many NGOs engaged in assisting and supporting refugees around the globe, including Austcare, Australia's specialist refugee agency, were arguing that without effective consultation with these refugees, efficient models for the delivery of basic needs and services would elude us. The UNHCR had convened, in 1985, a Round Table on Refugee Women. This highlighted the organisation's commitment to finding practical resolution of the protection and assistance issues faced by women refugees.

From the mid 1980s a growing chorus of voices was being raised by humanitarian aid and development practitioners about the need for refugees who came under the mantle of UNHCR's 'protection and assistance' mandate, to be more fully consulted in the planning process of service delivery. Through a number of different forums, including the International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA); the World Council of Churches, which drew on its partnerships with local and Indigenous church agencies; organisations such as Oxfam and Save the Children who also worked very closely with local people and local NGOs in delivering their programs; and through bodies such as the International YWCA, which gave a voice to people from the South, the same messages were being delivered. "You can't effectively support and assist the people if you don't ask them what they need, and where and how it should be delivered. Particularly it is not feasible to alleviate the burdens of refugee women (recognising women and children make up approximately 80% of the world's refugee population) if you don't listen to their experiences and voices."

Through the ensuing dialogue between UNHCR and the NGOs and local organisations, better ways of engaging the affected populations, of effectively consulting with the displaced people themselves, were identified. This dialogue culminated in the adoption by UNHCR of POP — People Oriented Planning — a framework taking account of the needs of women, men and children in planning the delivery of assistance to refugees and displaced people.

“The People-Oriented Planning Tool was developed to improve UNHCR’s programming with refugees worldwide. It is based on the fact that, for staff to do the best job possible in providing protection and assistance to refugee in any particular situation, they must know specific things about who the refugees are in that particular setting” (Andersen 1994, p. 1).

UN bodies being, at least from the NGO perspective, notoriously slow to change practices and policies, how was this significant shift in policy achieved, implemented and rolled out? Largely due to these voices being consistently raised in various international forums, and in direct consultations with the UNHCR at the Annual NGO Consultations that precede the UNHCR Annual Executive Committee, ultimately in 1990 the executive committee of the High Commissioner’s program endorsed a Policy on Refugee Women supporting enhancement of participation and access of refugee women in all programs.

The resulting POP training tool was designed to assist refugee workers undertaking needs assessment and service delivery planning by providing a framework for analysing socio-cultural factors in a refugee situation which might impact the success of planned activities. This training included information gathering using observation, common sense, simple surveys and household visits, registration data and consulting the experts (i.e. the refugees themselves). Specific reference points in the POP framework include the demographic profile of the refugee community including single-headed households, unaccompanied minors, elderly, disabled, etc. and the socio-cultural backgrounds, traditional food sources, health issues and taboos.

The specific concrete examples that follow are taken from the POP Training Document. From these examples it is evident that application of the POP principles leads to a more effective and user-friendly approach being adopted in service delivery.

Problems that arise	Possible solutions
Young women must provide sexual favours for food	Put women in charge of food distribution
Men must know how to cook	Provide wet rations; organise some women to cook; teach the men how to cook
Girls miss school because they are responsible for collecting water	Arrange water availability so that it does not conflict with school; better yet, provide an incentive for girls to go to school through the location and timing of water availability
In one Muslim camp, when it became clear that women were not getting needed medical assistance because all camp doctors were male, a women paediatrician was provided. What was needed was, of course, a gynaecologist. (Children, even girls, were able to be treated by male doctors.)	Know the culture; be sure to assess real health needs as well as traditional constraints faced by women.

Back to Brisbane

After many years of working internationally in humanitarian disaster response and capacity building with local partners and volunteer organisations I found myself in Brisbane managing the delivery of Community Services for the Queensland Ambulance Service. That's where I encountered this creature called 'community engagement' in a very different context. Having worked with capacity building and emergency preparedness programs with local NGO partners in Africa, the Middle East and Asia for many years, I knew what this term meant in the context of development and humanitarian aid but what did it mean when the machinery of government spoke of community engagement?

Anthropologist Anthony Oliver-Smith (Oliver-Smith 2002) writes about the current model of development of which the moral agenda involves not just the obligation to develop as the best means of combating poverty and raising living standards, but the right to develop as well. He notes that through the influence of the state and the market, the rights of the citizen to develop are addressed. "As a citizen, one's rights include participation in the decision-making that impacts one's life and community under this model" (Oliver Smith 2002, p. 6).

The Queensland Community Engagement Strategy

The Queensland Government, like so many others, recognises the value of engaging community members in decision-making processes. It is seen that engagement enables wider perspectives, sources of information, and potential solutions to improve decisions and services to be brought to bear. Community engagement can also create a basis for more productive relationships, better dialogue and consideration of alternative viewpoints leading to ultimately, better democracy. The OECD in a recent paper on open government noted that while public consultation for law making and rule-making was once rare it is becoming increasingly accepted (OECD 2005).

The Community Engagement Improvement Strategy, adopted in 2002, responded to expectations and international trends with a significant commitment to improving community engagement. This coordinated and staged approach involved an audit of training and support needs across whole of government, as well as development of CE competency standards and development of training and resource materials, widely accessible through the Internet.

In 'Engaging Queenslanders: An introduction to community engagement', it is stated that:

“there are a range of drivers and trends encouraging governments to improve community engagement in planning and decision-making. They include:

- Concerns about low levels of trust and confidence in government. As communities and governments have grown in diversity and complexity, real or perceived disconnections have increased and levels of trust and confidence in government and public institutions have decreased.
- Community expectations for governments to be responsive, accountable and effective. There is continuing pressure on governments to deliver increased efficiencies through more tailored and better coordinated policies, programs and services.
- Acknowledgement of the challenges of rapid social change and of the need to bridge the gap between the well-off and the well-connected, and the socially and economically disadvantaged.
- The realisation that government does not have the expertise, resources or influence to solve all issues.”

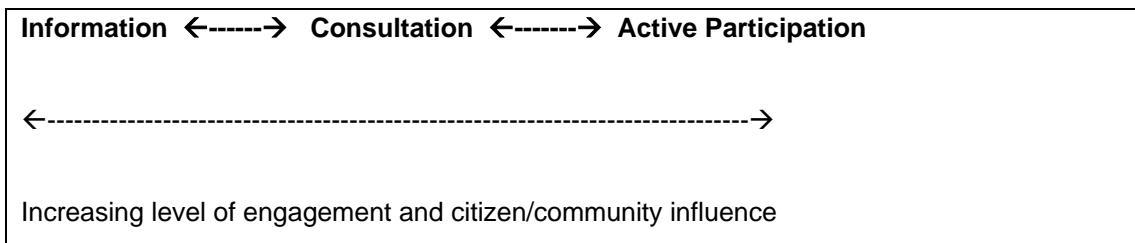
How does the Queensland Government define Community Engagement?

“Community engagement refers to the connections between governments, citizens and communities on a range of policy, program and service issues. It encompasses a wide variety of government–community interactions ranging from information sharing to

community consultation and, in some instances, active participation in government decision-making processes.

Engagement can be formal or informal, direct or indirect. Effective community engagement allows government to tap into diverse perspectives and potential solutions to improve the quality of its decisions. It enables citizens and communities to better understand the processes of government and to build their capacity to participate in deliberative processes through the development of confidence, skills, knowledge and development” (*Engaging Queenslanders: An introduction to community engagement*, p. 5).

The Queensland Strategy has adopted the OECD’s consultative model for engagement which shows a continuum on increasing influence from information sharing to active participation.



Key differences

My examination of the key official documents describing both the UNHCR People Oriented Planning process and the Queensland Community Engagement initiative highlights several significant differences between the two approaches. In summary these are as follows:

- The POP Framework addresses situations in which there are strong time-limiting factors and resource limiting factors on the delivery of basic needs to the target populations whereas at least in principle, effectively managed community engagement, will not be driven by life-or-death decision-making timeframes.
- The People Oriented Planning Framework recognises the target population as a significant source of expertise that it seeks to tap.
- Community Engagement involves a significant flow of information between the community and the decision-makers but this is characteristically largely *from* the decision-makers *to* the people impacted by those decisions.
- The POP Framework involves a significant flow of information from the community to the decision- making structure.
- The POP Framework is built around the concept of mainstreaming the needs of a particular target group of clients.
- The POP Framework is intended as a planning tool to improve the allocation of resources, the development of more effective service delivery plans to provide durable solutions to

community needs. The Community Engagement Strategy while emphasising the positive benefits that will flow from Community Engagement does not make it a central tool in the planning and resource allocation process.

Key similarities

Key similarities identified through an examination of the documentation of the UNHCR POP Framework and the Queensland Government's Community Engagement Strategy were that both initiatives were:

- motivated by the imperative to respond to the needs of the most vulnerable and marginalised members of the community the organisation is mandated to serve
- acknowledge the diversity in the populations the structures are mandated to serve and imply that this diversity is a positive and valued attribute
- requiring significant changes in organisational culture (i.e. the way we do things around here) to achieve successful implementation
- involving a strategy that required significant resources and time for implementation involving training, resource development and commitment to ongoing research and organisational learning
- intended to make service delivery more efficient and effective in serving the needs of particular defined communities or parts of communities.

Is there anything to be learned from considering these similarities and differences? What does this analysis contribute to advancing an agenda for community engagement practitioners that is people-focussed, rights-based and needs-driven? It may be useful to identify some core values that should inform our everyday practice as practitioners of community engagement. Whether or not it is openly articulated in our work culture, community engagement is a profoundly values-based practice and as such it is worthwhile to reflect on what these values might be.

What are our core principles?

Core principle — **Diversity** is a defining characteristic of human society; it is a positive value that our work seeks to uphold and enhance.

Core principle — **Community** has an **important contribution** to make in achieving sustainable outcomes in our work. We need to listen to and learn from them to leverage off their experience.

Core principle — **Communication** is a powerful tool and needs to be used respectfully and carefully.

Core principle — Understanding and appreciating the **internal dynamics** of communities gives decision-makers a powerful basis from which to plan successful interventions.

Whether we are comfortable with this reality or not, these values and principles manifest at the level of our everyday practice and determine how we engage with each other in the workplace, how we network with colleagues, how we learn from our experiences and how we learn from the observations and experiences of others.

Conclusions

“Openness is just one of many cherished public values citizens would like to see from government. They also expect equity, efficiency, responsibility and due respect for individual privacy in the use of public power and resources“ (OECD 2005, p. 6).

Many of us have used the fundamentals of community engagement as part of our work practice for many years, and certainly since before it was so named. As government inevitably becomes apparently more open, more transparent, it is vital that as practitioner of community engagement we remember why engagement with the community is central to achieving the outcomes we are employed to deliver. As stated by the OECD:

“Further efforts to improve tools, mainstream procedures and integrate the results of public consultation in established decision-making processes will be needed in governments are to become more responsive and adaptive in the future” (OECD 2005, p. 5)

References

Andersen M 1994, *People Oriented Planning at Work: Using POP to Improve UNHCR Programming*, Collaborative for Development Action Inc., Cambridge, MA.

Engaging Queenslanders: An introduction to community engagement,

<http://www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au/share_your_knowledge/resources/guides_publications.html>.

Engaging Queenslanders: Improving community engagement across the Queensland public sector,

<http://www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au/share_your_knowledge/resources/documents/pdf/guide_improvingce.pdf>.

Engaging Queenslanders: Community engagement in the business of government,

<http://www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au/share_your_knowledge/resources/documents/pdf/guide_business.pdf>.

Engaging Queenslanders: A guide to community engagement showcasing events,

<http://www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au/share_your_knowledge/resources/documents/pdf/guide_showcasing.pdf>.

Engaging Queenslanders: Evaluating community engagement,

<http://www.getinvolved.qld.gov.au/share_your_knowledge/resources/documents/pdf/guide_evaluation.pdf>.

Forbes Martin S 1991, *Refugee Women*, Zed Books, London.

Oliver-Smith A 2002, *Displacement, Resistance and the Critique of Development: from the grass-roots to the global*, Refugee Studies Centre, University of Oxford.

OECD 2005, *Policy Brief: Public Sector Modernisation: Open Government*,
<<http://www.oecd.org/dataoecd/1/35/34455306.pdf>>.