

Improving Accountability for Participatory Processes through Effective Evaluation

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Abstract

The practice of public deliberation around decision-making is growing and its advocates claim effectiveness. Critics insist that participatory methods and their ability to achieve desired outcomes have been inadequately evaluated. This is gradually changing and some detailed indicators and advice are circulating in participatory circles.

It is timely to test these frameworks in local contexts to see how useful they actually are. The authors have reviewed the existing literature; developed evaluation tools and tested them in practical settings within the Australian context and have tested criteria that have been devised by others.

Participatory practices can become even more robust if valid and reliable evaluation methods are routinely employed. The authors wish to share this work with others and to extend their research through further collaboration with other practitioners.

Introduction

The practice of public engagement around decision-making is growing and its advocates claim value in both the process and outcomes.

Advocates claim that:

- an effectively planned and implemented public engagement process builds trust between the sponsoring organisation and the public. Relationships are built through the dialogue and discussion used in the process.
- the ultimate outcome of effective public engagement is improved decisions. Decisions made as a result of effective public engagement are better informed by a range of diverse perspectives, more sustainable because they incorporate those perspectives that often relate to economic efficiency, technical feasibility, environmental protection and social acceptance, and are more able to be implemented because they have greater ownership of those affected.

Advocates also claim that to do effective public participation, it is first necessary to establish clear objectives, as well as understand and adhere to a set of process values or principles.

The International Association for Public Participation is a worldwide association that exists to improve the practice of public engagement. It offers principles and standards for the process of public engagement. It also identifies a range of potential objectives for those processes. The association, obviously an advocate of community engagement, promotes strongly that community engagement objectives should be established before selecting community engagement activities.

The association suggests that it is *always* the aim of community engagement at the very minimum to:

- establish, build and develop ongoing relationships between the sponsor organisation and the community, and within the different perspectives held within communities, based on trust and shared knowledge
- provide balanced and objective information to the community about the problem or opportunity under discussion, the decision that is to be made as a result of the consultation process, how and when the decision will be made and by whom, and provide opportunities for questions and clarification.

Other public participation objectives will depend on the significance and complexity of the decision to be made that the public is to be engaged in. These could include:

- To gather input from the community about their aspirations, issues and concerns and to use these in informing the decision
- To work directly with the community to encourage dialogue and discussion, as well as to generate innovation and ideas
- To partner with stakeholders and members of the community in the decision-making process.

Process values or principles promoted by IAP2 include concepts such as:

- The public has a right to engage in decisions that affect them
- If the public contribute, then its contribution should have some influence on the decision being made
- The engagement process needs to reflect all the interests of all the stakeholders, including the decision makers, and support a sustainable decision.
- Practitioners should seek out and facilitate input from those potentially affected
- Stakeholders should have some say in how they can be engaged in the process
- Appropriate information must be provided to those being engaged
- The community should be informed about how its engagement affected the ultimate decision.

Critics insist that participatory methods and their ability to achieve desired outcomes have been inadequately evaluated.

Critics claim that community engagement:

- wastes both time and money
- is a waste of resources because people will never all agree and are basically self-interested
- does not assist decision-making because the community doesn't have the skill or the knowledge to make technical, political or financial decisions.

Critics also claim that there is no effective business case for undertaking public engagement as there is no way to measure its value either to the project, the sponsor or the public.

We would agree that the lack of any serious attempts to establish success measures and appropriate indicators for community engagement processes, and then systematically collect data and learn from the resulting evaluation, has hampered improvement of community engagement practice. This is gradually changing and some detailed indicators and advice are starting to circulate in participatory circles.

It is timely to test these frameworks in local contexts to see how useful they actually are. We have:

- reviewed the existing literature
- developed evaluation frameworks and process tools
- tested them in practical settings in the Australian context.

Here is what we have learned.

Existing literature

The literature is not extensive. There are some excellent evaluation reports that relate to specific Australian case studies — for example, the reports completed for Australia's first consensus conference (McKay 1999; Crombie and Drucker 2000) and the report for a citizens' jury and televote on container deposit legislation (McKay 2001). Case studies in other countries are also well documented (for example, Fung and Wright 2003; Guston 1999; Renn et al. 1993, 1995; Ryfe 2003; Spano 2001).

Some very interesting writing on evaluation is emerging from the United Kingdom involving Gene Rowe and others (Rowe and Gammack 2004; Rowe et al. 2004a, 2004b; Rowe and Frewer 2000) because they offer a specific evaluation framework and also overview the body of literature.

Evaluation frameworks

IAP2 has established an evaluation framework for community engagement processes. This initially involves:

- establishing success measures for both the process and our objectives
- identifying indicators of that success. (Indicators are things that can be observed, heard, counted or measured in some way.)
- gathering relevant data to use the indicator to measure against the a predefined target
- using the data to understand the engagement process in relation to the success measures, and develop ways of improvement.

Other frameworks have been offered by Rowe and Frewer and also by InterAct, an alliance of practitioners, researchers, writers and policy makers in the United Kingdom. Rowe and Frewer suggest the need to define effectiveness and operationalise one's definition; that is, developing appropriate measurement instruments and processes. InterAct suggests that both the process itself and the impacts of that process will need to be assessed in any evaluation.

All evaluation frameworks seem to focus on undertaking evaluation as a learning activity to improve the practice of public participation or community engagement. However, most also recognise the use of evaluation to justify public or private expenditure and the use of resources in community engagement processes.

One result of testing a framework in a practical setting

As a practitioner, I was asked by a client in 2003 to use a recognised evaluation framework to establish a way that they could measure their effectiveness in undertaking community engagement activities.

Driving this request for a rigorous community engagement evaluation process were internal Business Services managers asking ... "How do you KNOW that what you are doing is adding value to the business?" Those business managers wanted community engagement practitioners to be accountable for the resources being expended on these activities. They wanted justification for the work being done, although in many cases the community engagement activities were statutory requirements or were undertaken to avoid the angst and controversy and additional cost that to all too often accompanied some of their major infrastructure projects.

The framework I used was the IAP2 framework. The initial process to establish indicators was intended to be collaborative so that the success measures and indicators established would be owned by the client organisation and its staff. I also intended that the data selected to measure actual practice against the indicators would be data already available internally to minimise the use of extensive additional data collection resources on the evaluation process.

However, pressures within the client organisation made it necessary to fast track the indicator development process. This meant that I, as an external consultant, developed success measures and indicators having minimal knowledge of internal processes and available data.

The client's rationale for using an external consultant to develop the indicators without the support of an internal steering committee was their need to get the work fast-tracked to meet internal deadlines. The process was being internally driven to achieve triple bottom line reporting requirements.

I do not actually know the outcome of my development process, as I have just delivered a spreadsheet to the client of suggested success measures, indicators, targets, data to be used to measure and learning that might result. One example of the suggested evaluation framework I used is shared here:

- A process success measure was — community engagement planning is incorporated into planning of projects
- An indicator of this was — community engagement plans are prepared and approved by the client community/strategy manager prior to project commencing
- The initial target set for the first year was — over 90 per cent of projects that proceed in 2005–06 year have approved community engagement plans
- Data that would need to be collected was — a record of sign off on community engagement plan before project commences.
- The way the data might be used for learning was — review record in July 2006; check for delays in projects; monitor implementation of plans.
- An outcome success measure was — improved image of client organisation
- An indicator of this was — stakeholder satisfaction with organisation's job in meeting its charter
- An initial target was — at least 50 per cent of stakeholders believe organisation is doing a good job in the first year. That the satisfaction trend rises over the three years of surveying.
- Data collected — survey administered annually for three years to random sample of all known stakeholders. Survey attracts 25 per cent response in first year. Upward trend in stakeholder levels of satisfaction with organisation.
- Use of data and learning — Survey results are documented and charted. Improvements in levels of satisfaction are noted, celebrated and rewarded.

The staff member I was working with recognised that their greatest challenge will be achieving the cultural change necessary to establish a real monitoring processes to measure community consultation activities and outcomes against indicators. There is little doubt that

people will need help in measuring the effect of their work. This is not an easy task and is like to involve significant work and resources. Despite the fact that these indicators are now in place, because most people are unaware of them, have no ownership of them and are not systematically gathering the data required, it is not at all clear how this will be done.

The internal community engagement people are frustrated with this process. They recognise that the organisation is just not there yet with recognition of the value of public engagement processes or outcomes and are unwilling to spend the resources to measure it. Their practitioner said “We spend money on pipe and concrete — these activities are easier to measure. Rubbery stuff like engaging the community is harder to measure. Good to do, but hard to measure the benefits. This is our Achilles Heel. We need to be better at quantification.”

She does not believe the organisation will use the indicators developed using the evaluation framework proposed, other than in a very superficial way. Instead they have started documenting something quite different — the amount of time taken to respond to complaints via the ombudsman. This may be data that is more easily collected, but no framework has been used to establish whether what it measures is actual success.

Conclusion

Participatory practices can become even more robust if valid and reliable evaluation methods are routinely employed.

However, these evaluation methods must be systematically developed so that the right questions are asked, effective measures are identified, data is systematically collected that monitors appropriate activity and the results are used to improve the practice.

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