Government – community engagement

Key learning and emerging principles

Background

In undertaking the CEDAR project over the last three years, there has been a vast accumulation of knowledge and experiences in processes and issues relating to community economic development.

In this paper we aim to capture some of our experiences in engaging with communities and share these experiences with other practitioners and the wider stakeholder community so as to contribute to building collective knowledge on this subject. The paper is intended to be a resource for those embarking on or keen to engage with communities, whereby they can learn and build on our experiences. It highlights our processes of engaging with communities, our key challenges in building a meaningful relationship with communities/community groups and emergent principles of engagement that can be considered in future work.

This paper, combined with other resource papers is being considered for publishing and if appropriate disseminated via seminars and workshops.

Audience for this paper

The audience for this paper is:

- Central policy agencies
- Communities/ community groups
- Local government bodies
- Researchers/other practitioners

Government[1] engagement with communities – motivations and drivers

Engaging citizens in policy making is part of good governance. Governments are under increasing pressure to enhance transparency and accountability. Information sharing, consultation and participation are fast gaining currency in civic democracy as tools for government - community engagement. Therefore for governments to respond to these challenges, they need to build a commitment and capacity for civic engagement.

Citizen engagement refers to processes through which government seeks to encourage deliberation, reflection, and learning on issues at preliminary stages of a policy process often when the focus is more on the values and principles that will frame the way an issue is considered. Citizen engagement processes are used to consider policy directions that are expected to have a major impact on citizens; address issues that involve conflicts in values or require difficult policy choices or tradeoffs; explore emerging issues that require considerable learning, both on the part of government and citizens; and build common ground by reconciling competing interests.

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[1] We use the term 'Government' here to refer to central agencies.

Citizen engagement differs qualitatively from consultation in a number of ways including an emphasis on in –depth deliberation and dialogue, the focus on finding common ground, greater time commitments and its potential to build civic capacity. In this regard, citizen engagement processes should be selectively used. (Privy Council Office, 2000)

Community engagement has often been described as a blend of social science and art. The science comes from sociology, political science, cultural anthropology, organisational development, psychology and other related disciplines. The equally important artistic element necessary to the process, however, involves using understanding, skill, and sensitivity to apply and adapt the science in ways that fit the community and purposes of the specific engagement effort[2].

The New Zealand government response

In New Zealand, the Government has set up the Office for the Community and Voluntary Sector[3] in response to a series of Cabinet decisions over the last 4 years which reflects the attitudes, influences, and beliefs of Ministers towards the need for a strong relationship with community, voluntary sector and tangata whenua organisations. The assumption underpinning this action is that "a better relationship will help government agencies to achieve their outcomes, it will help Government meets its goals, and will contribute to strengthening civil society".[4]

The first step to making participation and engagement real for communities is for policy makers to establish networks and form collaborations with community and voluntary groups so as to engage with the range of policy and community issues. Such collaborations offer an opportunity for policy makers to tap into the wealth of knowledge, experience and diversity present in communities thereby enhancing the quality of their policy advice and ensuring that public policy is informed by what is happening 'on the ground'. This also fulfils governments desire to develop 'bottom up' policy rather than 'top down' policy. It also increases the distribution of knowledge about the policy process among community stakeholders.

The Community Economic Development Action Research (CEDAR) project illustrates how a government's intent of seeking active participation through community engagement and linking community experience to policy making could be was realised within a policy setting in New Zealand. This paper focuses on the experience and learning from engaging with communities.

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[2] http://www.cdc.govt/phppo/pce/part1.htm
[3] The Office of the Community and Voluntary Sector was started in September 2004 and is auspiced within the Ministry for Social Development.
[4] Presentation by the Office of the Community and Voluntary Sector

The CEDAR project description

In June 2000, the Labour Market Policy Group[5] (LMPG) and Community Employment Group[6] (CEG), both service units within the Department of Labour jointly initiated a three–year pilot project[7] designed to use research as a conduit/bridge for developing a closer connection between government policy and 'communities.'[8] The project involved researchers, community development fieldworkers and policy analysts working with three research communities to build *grounded* knowledge about the processes of community economic development and feed this learning back to relevant policy agencies through an ongoing information exchange cycle.

The purpose behind community engagement is to involve communities in decisions and research that affect their lives. A critical component of this process relates to involvement of key stakeholders and community members in the research process itself. We responded to this by deliberately choosing an interactive social science research methodology, Action Research as it served two purposes. Firstly, it allowed the researchers to set up an active reflection process, through which the project team (researchers, community groups and policy analysts) could explore the systemic issues that helped/hindered communities reaching their economic development goals and develop solutions. Secondly, it helped promote reflective practice at all levels: within communities, within community development workers and within policy makers. By setting up such a dialogue between government and community, there has been mutual learning: we, as central agencies have developed an in depth understanding of issues and their complexity, with communities regard as being important; and the community has learnt more abut policy development processes and how they can work within this framework.

The expectation was that the knowledge and understanding of community economic development processes built over time through such active engagement with communities and community groups would contribute at many levels including:

- Contributing to the policy makers understanding and concept of the 'real' world (Weiss)
- Enhancing the quality of the Department's policy advice and the ability to ensure that policy advice reflects the reality of what is happening on the ground

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[5] Labour Market Policy Group advises Government on policy issues related to the labour market to promote better economic and social outcomes. In particular, LMPG helps to enhance employment prospects, participation in the labour force, earnings abilities, skill levels, safe and productive work environments, effective migration, economic growth and social cohesion through advice on laws and policies relating to these issues.

[6] Community Employment Group works with communities and groups to help them achieve social and economic prosperity through local employment and enterprise development. CEG works alongside these communities and their organisations, building their capacity to plan and create positive change, leading to sustainable local economic and employment opportunities.

[7] see Appendix 1 for a more detailed description of the project

[8] the term 'communities' is used more broadly to refer a geographically bound community such as a neighbourhood, city, or rural town as well as network of relationships based on a common interest or purpose

- Meeting growing demand from communities, voluntary groups, Iwi and Maori organisations for public participation in the policy process

- Enhancing community knowledge, understanding and awareness of various policy initiatives and the policy making process.

As already noted, the research project involved collaboration between policy analysts and researchers within the Department of Labour, community development workers from CEG and the three research communities and was located within a policy team. This was a significant advantage for the project as the research team acted as a conduit across all the different groups and balanced their different interests and priorities. In this section, we discuss the key steps that were undertaken by the project team in facilitating dialogue and engagement on the ground.

Building relationship with the research communities

Building collaborative relationships is an integral part of action research (AR) and for CEDAR this meant that the research teams needed to build collaborative relationships with the CEG fieldworker, the AR communities and policy teams. In this paper, we explore our experiences in building relationships with the AR communities, and the lessons that can be drawn for other government agencies keen on engaging with communities

In CEDAR, we explicitly relied on the Community Employment Group fieldworker's networks and connections to facilitate our entry into the selected communities/community groups. Consequently, the fieldworker played a critical role as a bridge person and the researchers spent considerable time and resources in engaging the fieldworkers in discussions and debate about the project and its processes. The reassurances and confidence gained as a result of this relationship between the fieldworker and researchers meant that the fieldworker was happy to introduce the researchers to key community members and help them make the initial contacts. It was then up to the researchers to build their own personal relationship with the key players and we did so by staying true to the principles of trust, reciprocity and respect.[9]

There were three stages in our bridge building exercise with each of the three research communities: getting started; maintaining engagement and identifying the imperative or the puzzle. We also consciously worked with the action research cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting cycle, then planning again before a new action was undertaken (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Wadsworth 1997a). The cycles started with small questions or issues to explore and when the planning stage came around again, the project team took account of what had been learnt in the previous cycle. The aim was to increase our understanding of the local situation with each subsequent conversation and visit to the community.

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[9] Committee on Community Engagement. (1997). *Principles of Community Engagement*. Atlanta A pp. 62-63.

Stage one: Getting started

Before starting to engage with the community, the research team needed to develop clarity about the purpose and goals of the engagement effort, from their own perspective. We explored our own assumptions and clarified the purpose of engagement through questions such as "what are we seeking participation about"; "what will participation look like"; "what can we offer and what we can't offer"; 'what will the benefit be for the community in participating in such an engagement process", etc.

Such intense deliberation, it was felt, would help the team convey key messages to the community and highlight why participation was worthwhile. And of course, the team could then plan a process that would enable initial engagement to occur. Working through an existing gatekeeper was another part of this getting started phase. In AR terms we could only plan for the next step and see what happened from there, that is, observing and reflecting before planning any subsequent action.

Our approach during this phase was to spend time talking with key community members in their own homes/ premises about issues facing their community/community organisation. The aim was to establish a point of interest around which to engage with the community (leading to our ultimate aim of identifying an imperative for action) and to get community buy-in and agreement to be involved or to work with us. This initial pool was expanded to include others through a snowballing technique. Each time we talked to a person we asked them to nominate others we should talk to, in order for us to build a more comprehensive picture of the community and its issues. On occasions, residents asked us to speak with people outside of the immediate community, and this was undertaken.

For instance, in Twizel, Meridian Energy was a major employer but was located in Christchurch, 4 hours away from Twizel. The CEO of Tu Kahu, the housing enterprise wanted us to talk to other Iwi members around the district in order to build a comprehensive understanding of the community, the organisation and its mission. Pacific Underground, performing arts organisation wanted us to talk to Creative New Zealand in Wellington regarding economic development of arts based organisations and the unique issues they face. In this way, we built a holistic picture of the community as well as built personal relationships with each community resident and this formed the basis of our subsequent exploration.

Stage two: Maintaining engagement

In order to maintain the initial contact and build on our relationship, ongoing communication proved to be vital; it was the 'glue' that helped establish high quality person-to-person relationships with each community member. For ongoing engagement to occur, we need to find ways in which we could sustain interest and energy and convey our commitment to the project and the process. We did this by establishing regular cycle of feedback through individual conversations, visit reports and/or group meetings. We documented our initial observations, assessments and understanding and conveyed this to the community so as to invite comment, response or debate. Through such iterative cycles, we built a rich picture of the community and

their issues, as well as had a chance to get to know each other a bit better. In this way we aimed to work together towards a participative approach and build a shared understanding of the project and its aims.

Stage three: Identifying the imperative or the puzzle

The third stage involved identification of the imperative or the puzzle around which the community and the research team's energies and actions could be channelled.

Since action research is especially useful in situations where a group of people want to improve some part of their lives, or resolve a puzzle, it was critical that the team worked collaboratively to identify the puzzling or intriguing question. The first two steps discussed above were intended to build rapport and invite key stakeholders to reflect about issues facing their communities. This third phase was intended to invite the community as a whole to work with the research team and across one another on the issues that needed to be improved (action aim) and what we need to find out (research problem) and negotiate how we may go about doing this task. We talked to key individuals during our visits to the community every 6 weeks, and expanded this group when needed or appropriate to include other members.

In one community, as our understanding of the community developed, we organised brainstorming meetings, allowing issues to emerge in an inductive way. From our perspective, there were no fixed agendas. We placed information gathered from conversations with key members before them, and asked questions of the community to collectively identify significant issues that impeded them from moving towards their economic development goals. This process took a series of meetings and at each stage the discussion and data analysis was made very transparent. The research communities' really valued this process and felt it contributed to their understanding of issues and challenges faced in their community. They also commented that they had usually never seen the material generated from discussions with government agencies, and often when they did see the material, the language in such final research reports was complex and abstract. By contrast, they found the communication from CEDAR project team very accessible and easy to read.

We worked at the pace of the community: we didn't push the timeframes, we didn't push an agenda, we didn't push to arrive at common issues – we allowed these to emerge.

The key challenges

The emphasis on community engagement promotes a focus on common ground and recognises that citizens and communities have important knowledge and experience to add to the public policy debate. The challenge is of course to set up a process that encourages both groups to deepen their understanding of an issue and an opportunity to share their knowledge, experience and opinions. In order for such commitment to be put into action, government agencies and communities must increase their capacities for working collaboratively to inform and stimulate mutual learning.

We discuss some of these experiences and challenges from the reality of such our engagement efforts. Some of our (the government agency initiating the engagement effort) key challenges in building a successful relationship with communities related to time, our capacity, our project 'boundary' and the mind set of communities and government. In this section, we explore some of these challenges using illustrative examples from the CEDAR project and hope that other groups embarking on similar engagement efforts learn from and build on our experiences. We are particularly keen to hear from other practitioners about their experiences in engaging with communities so that we can synthesise the learning thereby contributing to knowledge and strengthened community government relationships.

A problem highlighted by CEDAR is that central agencies don't seem to know what they want to engage with communities about, and may even be reluctant to do so. Managing this complex process was not without its highs and lows. There were occasions when the community felt frustrated and other occasions when the researchers' were frustrated.

Co-operation versus collaboration: The initial meetings in one community proved to be quite frustrating for both the researchers and the communities involved in terms of establishing a clear focus or an imperative for action. Further probing showed that the reason for this frustration was that the two groups were talking past one another. We realised later that the residents attending the community meetings assumed that they were being asked to co-operate with the research team, a process where the researchers would present their needs and the community is asked whether it matches their needs. If mutual interest exists, then a relationship is formed on that basis.

However, in CEDAR, the researchers were in fact seeking to set up a collaborative relationship, a way of 'working together' through a process of negotiation. This meant the researchers' expectations of the community compared with their cooperative response did not match and led to frustration for both parties. We wanted the community to collectively identify their puzzles and imperatives so that we could work through these issues with them over the three years. However, they kept telling us to 'identify what we wanted to explore' and they would then co-operate with us in exploring the issues.

Service / product mentality versus learning. Most government agencies are keen to contract with community groups to purchase a service or product from them e.g. contracts for delivery of social services. So initially when building this bridge at the local level, we needed to be clear from the outset and convey early on that our process of engagement was about mutual learning. However, in our project, we were inviting the groups to participate in a learning experience, so were unable to offer anything tangible. This also raised the issue of volunteers' time and availability to the process. It's true, people need to see and experience 'real' benefits for the extra time, effort and involvement they are asked to give. So the measure of worth is relative to what is of value to them. Interestingly, it is this investment in learning and reflection that was ultimately appreciated by the communities, and contributed to building social capital.

(Eg. Tu Kahu – insights on training for board members. PU – insights on their own development processes).

The issue of boundary: Policy issues and community issues are complex and interdependent and so cannot be neatly compartmentalised along institutional lines. Through our engagement with communities in CEDAR, we identified policy issues that cut across conventional government policy sectors. For instance, in Twizel, a seasonal tourist economy, the interface between the benefit/welfare and tax system emerged as an important barrier for part time workers and those on benefit to get into full time work. This significant policy issue is outside the scope of the Department of Labour, yet is an important issue facing employers in the tourism sector. Therefore having the flexibility to explore issues as they emerged proved to be quite challenging for all those involved.

The various gatekeeper roles also raised boundary issues. For instance the role and approach taken by the fieldworker to working with/in the community, where they had established relationships and ways of working that sometimes meant the research team had to back off and/or reassess their approach so as not to conflict with that of the fieldworker. It was also important for the researchers (as outsiders) to know and understand the roles and relationships different people had in the community and the dynamics between different people, and to be sensitive to them. An important working principle was to 'do no harm' through the research process.

Recognising the 'pace' of the community. Working at the pace of the community is key to a successful engagement effort. Government agencies keen to engage with community groups devote resources for this effort where as for the community, it means stretching volunteer time and taking on this task in addition to many other priorities they already have. There is a need to recognise that communities have their own pace, and any agency keen to engage needs to *know* what is the right pace, *assess* how fast community members are willing and able to go, and *identify* who in the community can and will drive the pace of change. Government agencies are used to planning processes that define goals and outcomes with timelines that respond to their agency needs. Community members have their own sense of timing, which must be recognised and respected.

Our experience showed that researchers' skills and experience were quite important in this scenario, to sense the mood of the community, and allow the community to determine the pace. This took a lot of time and on occasion, we were unable to undertake our planned task. Another reflection by the team relates to 'push'. The researcher's relationship with the community was built on personal relationships. There were some occasions when we could have 'pushed' the community a bit further; but we didn't. This was a deliberate and conscious choice as the CEDAR team recognised that we were not going to be around long enough to follow up on our actions. The decision about 'push' was also due to the fact that the fieldworker played a critical role in identifying the 'pace' in CEDAR, and given that ultimately they had the long term relationship with the communities, the researchers weren't prepared to challenge the status quo.

Emerging key principles for government - community engagement

In developing this paper, the CEDAR team drew on their practical experiences, the literature and the collective experiences of fieldworkers. The practical experiences combined with the literature surface underlying principles of engagement that can help other practitioners and government agencies in designing and implementing a successful engagement process.

Some of the key principles identified through our experiences are:

Be clear about the goals of the engagement effort. Having an explicit agenda, focus and purpose can help in articulating why involvement may or may not be worthwhile for the community, and reach an agreement early about participation. This does not preclude a collective determination of the issues to be explored, and being flexible and responsive to issues that emerge.

Be flexible. There are two related aspects to flexibility. Firstly, it is about working at the pace of the community, and not pushing the agency timeframe to accelerate the pace. The second aspect relates to working with issues identified by the community as being important, rather than a pre determined agenda that takes the government agency issues into consideration.

Establish relationships based on trust and reciprocity. Trust and reciprocity relates to the promise of mutual learning that such an engagement process can offer. While traditional consultation process tends to be extractive and take from the community, in true engagement there is a promise of mutual sharing and learning. In CEDAR, while the Department gained a deeper understanding of community issues, the community learnt more about policy making process[10] and ways in which they can influence this process.

Be prepared to invest time and resources as engagement takes time. Engaging with communities is a long term process**.** Communities are at different stages of their development cycle and this, impacts their ability to engage. It is important therefore to understand where the community is at and invest appropriate level of time, energy and resources to enable effective engagement to occur.

Work through existing '*bridge persons'*. There are government and non government agencies out there who are already engaged in development work with communities and community groups and they can play an excellent *bridge person* role. Before embarking on any engagement effort, it would be worthwhile to invest time in identifying these bridge persons and where possible work with and through them, as the community then experiences a more co-ordinated, integrated approach from government.

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[10] An example of this learning relates to the issue of benefit tax interface. When this issue surfaced in Twizel, the researchers actively sought our information about current policy work and thinking in this area and conveyed this to employers in Twizel. This was followed up with discussions with employers and further issues were clarified. In this manner, employers understanding of issues and understanding of policy process was deepened.

Communication. Communicating with communities in plain language and in ways they can best relate to, including considering formats such as frequent report backs, discussion groups, digital stories, public forums followed up by individual conversations contribute significantly to this dialogue. The CEDAR process, whereby we had individual conversations followed by group discussions followed again by individual reflective sessions contributed significantly to the relationship building process and free and frank discussions. It was a community conversation, and the emphasis was on seeking and finding common group.

Practical considerations. Paying attention to the practical needs and circumstances of community members involved in the engagement process, with reference to such issues as timing of meetings and events (for example holding meetings in the evenings, or in the afternoon, having more than one meeting giving members the opportunity and flexibility), access to child care, and week end meetings. In certain instances, we carried out interviews in the community member's homes, if they were unable to attend the wider group meetings. This flexibility is important for developing and sustaining a true engagement process.

Engaging with Maori and Pacific groups. The principles of engagement discussed above are equally significant for Maori and Pacific Peoples groups as well. However, when engaging with these groups, there is the additional need to observe and acknowledge cultural protocols and the whakapapa connections to establish meaningful relationships.

For instance, our early discussions with Ngati Kahungunu Iwi Incorporated (NKII) began with formal introduction, speaking protocols that were observed by both parties. An overview of the proposed project was presented to NKII. The Chairman responded and gave an initial korero regarding the context for NKII and their past and present relationships with government departments identifying both the strengths and barriers to those relationships. He then went on to make a statement as an aside that had particular significance for the project. He addressed the Maori members of the team and said "We know who you are, what you know and who you relate to". These words were understood by Maori team members as signalling entry into a relationships with NKII based on their whakapapa; their tribal and familial relationships. This personal recognition allowed the project to proceed but also laid the burden of responsibility for the project on the Maori researchers. Therefore any transgression is not only a reflection of their lack of individual responsibility but also a slight on the mana of their people, tribe, iwi, hapu and in the team members' cases parents and whänau.

Engaging with Pacific Peoples groups too required a similar understanding and acknowledgement of the formal protocols and connections. Our entry was facilitated and managed by a Pacific field advisor and accessing these local and family connections was key to our successful engagement.

Questions for consideration by others

Given our experiences in CEDAR, and some reading of the literature, we would like to pose some questions for consideration by other agencies and practitioners before beginning their engagement effort. In many ways, the system i.e. the government agency initiating the engagement faces the biggest challenge in learning how to engage communities and how to use the information generated from these discussions meaningfully. Therefore, people working in systems need to ask themselves the following type of questions to determine the level of commitment in the organisation for the engagement:

- What are the values that are driving the engagement effort?
- What is the intent of the agency in initiating engagement with communities and how is this reflected in their strategy?
- On what terms do we engage communities?

- Does the organisation have existing collaborations that can be leveraged?
- What are the resources and expertise available within the agency to support and invest in the engagement effort? Are there any existing mechanisms or will new ones be in place to ensure that relevant data on community needs will be used?
- Is there flexibility to work with issues that are beyond the boundary of a particular government agency? What mechanisms can or need to be set up and what relationships need to be built if this has to happen?

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