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Popular participation *Involving citizens effectively in action planning*

Popular participation – citizen and non-government organization (NGO) involvement -- is in vogue these days. National and state agencies, local governments and other action groups feel pressure to have citizens take part in key decisions that are made at local levels. Ordinary citizens are members of important decision panels and advisory boards. Representatives of various local and state “causes” are included also. Public hearings and comment periods are mandated at certain key stages. People are invited to take part in town meetings and special workshops. Ideas and reactions are encouraged via local newspapers and the internet. We see this in a wide range of undertakings, such as design of environmental cleanups, transportation, school programs, land use, forest management, crime reduction and economic development.

Yet it’s not always true that potentials for helpful citizen inputs are utilized well. Complex technical and legal issues may be debated without adequate, understandable background information or expert clarification. Emotional value judgments may cloud the choices. Certain leaders, or staff from groups, may say they represent the people, but they may dominate the discussion without really having their ear to the ground about local conditions and how citizens feel. The agency may go through the motions of involving citizens, but in fact do what it was going to do anyway.



If you are responsible for planning how citizens can productively be involved, it’s important to think through questions like the following:

1. *Will citizen-participants have actual decision-making authority? Or are they being involved mainly as sounding boards, sources of ideas and legitimizers?*
2. *What specific kinds of inputs from citizens can be especially helpful?*
 - ✓ Understanding of local values, wants and don’t-wants, and sensitivities?
 - ✓ Insights into unique local traits and history that may affect program design?
 - ✓ Gauging of likely responses to, and concerns about, proposed actions?
 - ✓ Help in spreading the word and gaining support for actions taken?
3. *Whom to involve? Stakeholders directly impacted? Broader publics who have indirect interest? Leaders and representatives of groups that are felt to speak for the people?*
4. *Involve citizens at early stages, or wait until tentative plans have been fleshed out?*
5. *What background information and expertise to provide?*
6. *How to build up mutual trust among the participants, and in the process, and minimize confrontation and information distortion?*