



Tools for Exploring Community Engagement in Partnerships

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Introduction

Much has been written about 'community engagement' and 'community participation' in donor-funded development projects. However, there is very little literature on this in relation to partnerships that involve organisations in the private, public and civil society sectors working together around sustainable development issues. These multi-stakeholder partnerships stress the need to involve 'the community' actively in their work in order to ensure the effective targeting of their projects and the promotion of wider sustainable changeⁱ. But what does 'community engagement' in partnerships really mean? How do different partners perceive the need for community involvement in their work? Who represents the community in a partnership and what is the level and scale of their engagement within it? What specific issues need to be taken into account when building partnerships with communities? How can community involvement in partnerships be developed, maintained and monitored?

BPD Water and Sanitation has grappled with these questions while working with a number of partnership projects that have sought to engage community representatives throughout the different phases of a project cycle. Although working from the perspective of water and sanitation delivery, BPD has gained valuable experience in this area and seeks to share this learning more widely with other sectors. This paper highlights some of the issues that have emerged from this work and offers a series of discussion tools for exploring community engagement in partnerships more deeply.

What is 'community engagement'?

The terms 'community' and 'engagement' are loose concepts. 'Community', which is often used interchangeably with 'civil society' and even 'the third sector', can mean a group of people who share anything from geographic location to similar circumstances, interests or values. The concept of 'engagement' is also broad and used to encompass 'consultation', 'involvement' and 'participation', usually with an implication that such activities offer some form of empowerment.ⁱⁱ

This paper does not seek to define 'community engagement' but rather draw attention to the fact that the concept is value-laden and can be interpreted in different ways by different audiences while masking deep-seated issues of power and control.ⁱⁱⁱ It is therefore essential that partnership practitioners identify exactly what they mean by the term in relation to their work and are able to articulate this with regard to specific partnership purposes and contexts throughout the different phases of partnering (see below).

Proposed tools

A series of tools are suggested here as a basis for exploring community engagement in partnerships. The tools are intended to assist in unpacking some of the issues that emerge in this process rather than as devices for ascertaining measurements. They may be used as aids to discussion around community involvement issues within a particular partnership and/or as a way of exploring comparisons between partnerships. They are at a very early stage of development and have not yet been tested on the ground. In sharing initial thinking on them it is hoped that both their content and potential usefulness will be considered by those working in partnerships before they are trialled in different partnership contexts.

The tools are based on the work of Plummer and Taylor^{iv} who have created a model to investigate the characteristics of community participation in development projects in China. This model takes the shape of a wheel with spokes that represent different stages of a community project cycle. These include: problem identification; planning; design; construction; management; financial; monitoring; evaluation and follow-up management. Along each spoke of the wheel there are levels of community participation from 0 to 7 which denote:

- 0 – No participation
- 1 – Forced
- 2 – Notification
- 3 – Attendance
- 4 – Expression
- 5 – Discussion
- 6 – Decision-making
- 7 – Initiative

An assessment of participation at each stage of a project is offered so that an overview of how successful community involvement is can be viewed over the lifetime of the project. Perfect participation at the different stages of a project's development is achieved, very infrequently, when all the spokes meet at grade 7 while the more common forms of participation are at the lower ends of the scale and concentrated at the centre of the wheel.



Figure adapted from Plummer and Taylor, 2004.

This model has been adapted here as a starting point for examining different aspects of community participation with specific reference to partnerships. The tools, as outlined above, are generic and will need to be adapted to different contexts and tested in different environments. As Plummer and Taylor emphasise^v, community

Phases of partnership development

Because partnerships are constantly changing, community engagement needs to be examined in relation to the different processes of a partnership project's development and reviewed on a regular basis. It has been suggested that there are up to twelve different phases involved in partnering.* For the purposes of this paper, these have been drawn together into five broad phases in which review processes (monitoring and evaluation) are implicit within each.**

1. Scoping: researching the contextual case for partnership and drawing on relevant prior experiences. Selecting partners by identifying incentives for working together, analysing the strengths and weaknesses of potential contributions and the value and risks of working together.

2. Initiating: establishing the ground rules for collaboration. Agreeing on core principles, objectives and goals, the different roles and responsibilities that will be undertaken as well as appropriate partnership structures.

3. Implementing: ensuring the engagement of all partners and monitoring that tasks are being carried out as agreed. Developing and reviewing management and decision-making structures and using appropriate systems for communication, accounting, reporting, conflict-resolution etc.

4. Consolidating: strengthening and refining methods for working together effectively. Building appropriate structures and mechanisms for the partnership to ensure longer-term commitment and continuity and reinforcing wider societal linkages.

5. Sustaining/terminating: making decisions about what should happen after a partnership has completed its activities. Agreeing on an appropriate conclusion or developing further work.

*These include scoping, identifying, building, planning, managing, resourcing, implementing, measuring, reviewing, revising, institutionalising and sustaining or terminating. See Tennyson, R. (2004) The Partnering Toolbook, IBLF, London p4

**These phases are not intended to demonstrate a linear progression of how a partnership model should develop as they may overlap and/or occur at different times during a partnership's development.

participation is shaped by a range of both external and internal factors that interact with the project itself to create particular operating contexts. They also stress that, although their tool offers possibilities for useful comparative analysis, reasons for differences between projects need to be carefully elaborated upon.

Tool 1: Why is community engagement in partnerships important?

While the active engagement of communities in partnerships is encouraged in order to ensure their involvement in decisions about factors that affect their lives, it is clear that this process is not an easy one and demands a substantial commitment of both time and resources. All partners therefore need to be clear about their particular organisational incentives for seeking to involve the community in their work and whether the benefits of doing so outweigh the drawbacks of engaging in a process which might ultimately be misleading or even unnecessary. In order to do this, partners may find it helpful, during the scoping phase, to carry out an assessment of both the risks and rewards of engaging with the community.

Application 1

A basic scale for each sector partner to use in order to investigate why it should seek to engage with the community in a partnership is offered below.

Reasons for businesses to engage in partnership with the community

- 0 - fulfils no need
- 1 - creates good will or promotes better image or profile
- 2 - spurs innovation in product development
- 3 - enhances revenue collection or creates new markets
- 4 - ensures security and social license to operate
- 5 - fulfils contractual compliance needs

Reasons for the public sector to engage in partnership with the community

- 0 - fulfils no need
- 1 - creates good will or promotes better image e.g. for electoral purposes
- 2 - helps provide extra funding and resources for services
- 3 - ensures wider service coverage and reduces tensions
- 4 - enhances security through social inclusion and public support
- 5 - fulfils service provision gaps and reduces dependency on government

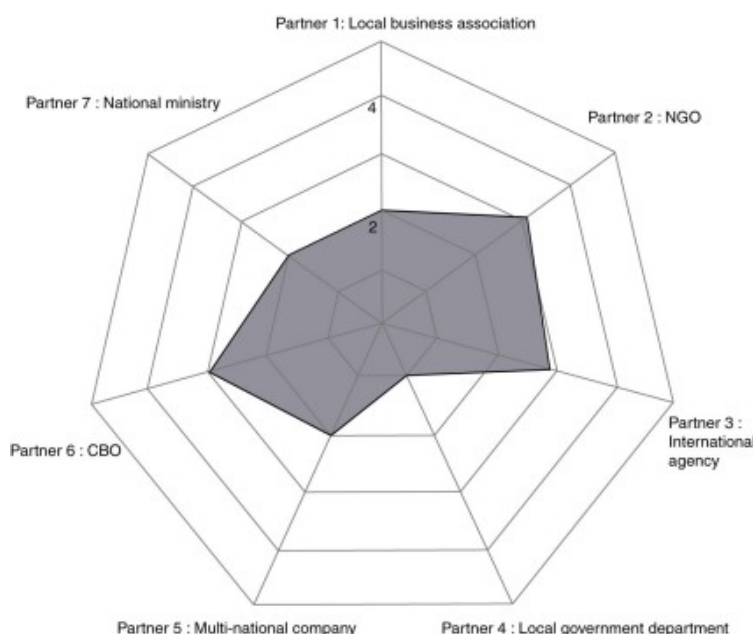
Reasons for NGOs to engage in partnership with the community

- 0 - fulfils no need
- 1 - creates good will or promotes better image or profile
- 2 - improves resource leverage or decreases reliance on donor funding
- 3 - improves long-term prospects and sustainability of projects and programmes
- 4 - empowers through capacity-building and skills provision
- 5 - mainstreams marginalised groups and builds social capital

These scales demonstrate a progression from concern with core internal organisational activities of a short-term nature to deeper and more external social investment over the medium-term and, finally, to wider engagement in strong and committed societal connections of a long-term nature. They are necessarily general and will obviously vary according to specific contexts and sector levels. At the same time although the scales constitute a hierarchy, they are not necessarily exclusive and might all apply to a given partnership.

Partner organisations may wish to brainstorm their own significant drivers for community engagement and then align them to the appropriate benefit levels, recognising that different drivers are likely to sit at different levels. The broad groupings of 'business', 'government' and 'NGO', for instance, will need to be probed more deeply in relation to both the partnership context and proposed project activities. Different levels within these will influence the nature of the indexes used e.g. business can include multi-national corporations, national businesses or small, medium and micro enterprises (SMMEs); governments may vary between authoritarian and democratic and be involved at either national, regional or local levels in a partnership while the NGO sector can include a variety of different organisations ranging from international and donor agencies to national NGOs and local community based organisations (CBOs). In addition, partners such as trade unions, academic institutions or the media for example, may not 'fit' within these sector groupings and different scales will need to be drawn up for them based upon their particular organisational aims and incentives.

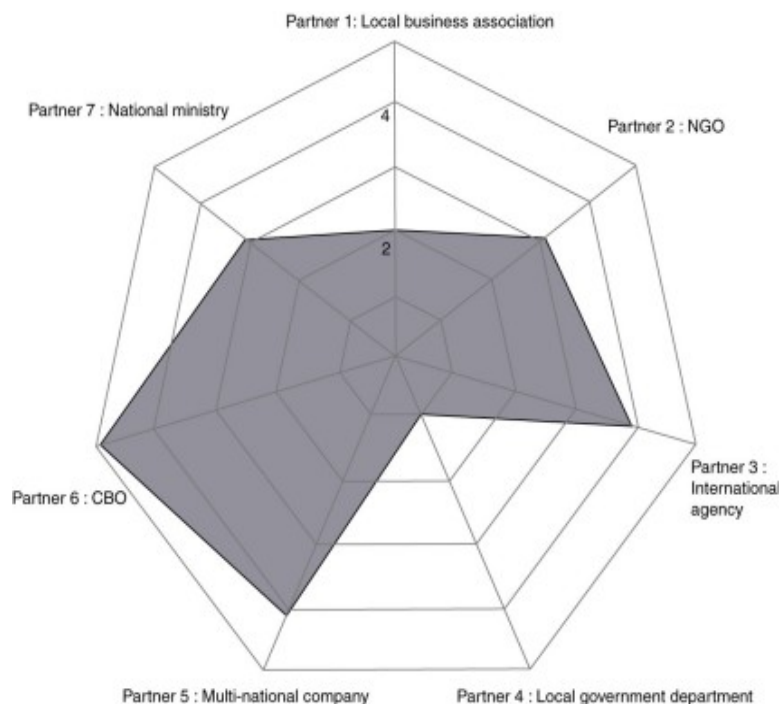
With these provisos in mind, a shape that represents how engagement with the community meets the needs of different partners can be created by bringing together all the partner scales so that they form the spokes of a wheel. This exercise can assist in ascertaining the degree to which each partner is serious in its commitment to community involvement in the partnership as well as exploring understandings of the benefits of such engagement from each perspective.



Application 2

In order to further assess what the general perception within a partnership is of the need to engage the community, another possible way of working with the tool is to use different spokes for different partners and grade their commitment using the scale outlined below. This might also help to unearth more clearly when different partners think it is unnecessary to involve the community and offer the possibility for discussion as to why this is so.

- 0 - no perceived need
- 1 - coerced but disinterested
- 2 - sees value but not keen to contribute resources (time, money)
- 3 - positive and willing to contribute limited resources
- 4 - enthusiastic and keen to be involved through wider resource provision
- 5 - promotes and champions idea and seeks to bring other partners on board



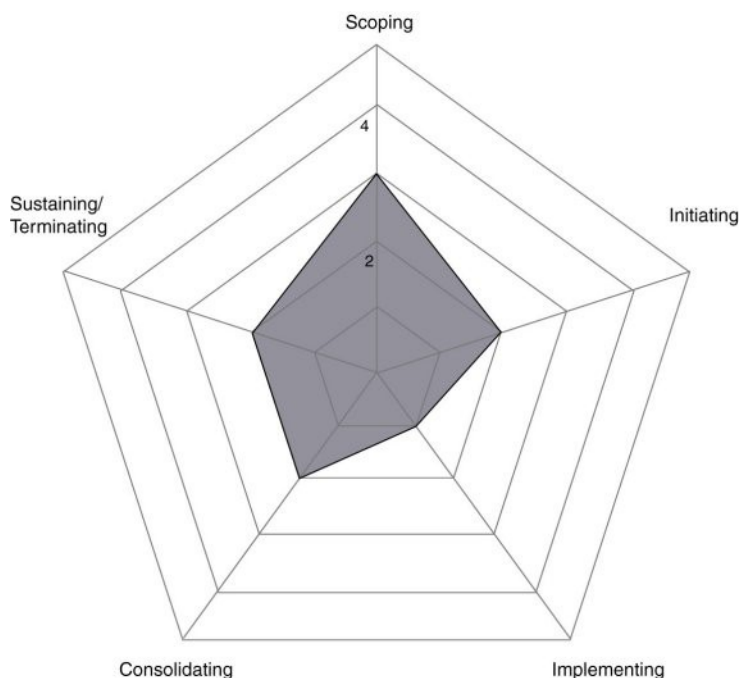
Tool 2: Who should be involved from the community in partnership projects?

Once the partnership has agreed on the need for involving the community in its work it needs to identify who represents 'the community' and, just as importantly, who does not. Genuine community engagement requires identifying the 'right' community representatives to work with and not just those with power and control. This means distinguishing between institutions and individuals that 'speak' on behalf of the community and the linkages between these. It also involves breaking down assumptions and generating an awareness of who is excluded and how issues relating to this such as age, class, cultural beliefs, ethnicity, gender, rural/urban background, political affiliation and health status overlap, change and develop over time in relation to different contexts.

Application

A wheel for exploring different levels of community engagement offers partners a chance to assess who is involved during the different phases of a partnership (see above) and examine where changes need to be made by the inclusion of wider or more focussed community representation. Thus the five phases of partnership-building are represented by the spokes of the wheel and graded according to:

- 0 – no participation
- 1 – elected officials (i.e. local councillors who are elected as community representatives)
- 2 – elected officials plus a few other community leaders
- 3 – elected officials, community leaders, representatives of other interest groups (e.g. women or youth organisations)
- 4 – elected officials, community leaders, representatives of other interest groups, some gender-based analysis for selection of participation
- 5 – integrated approach: unpacking different levels of power related to race, gender, age, etc. so that whole community participates/is represented

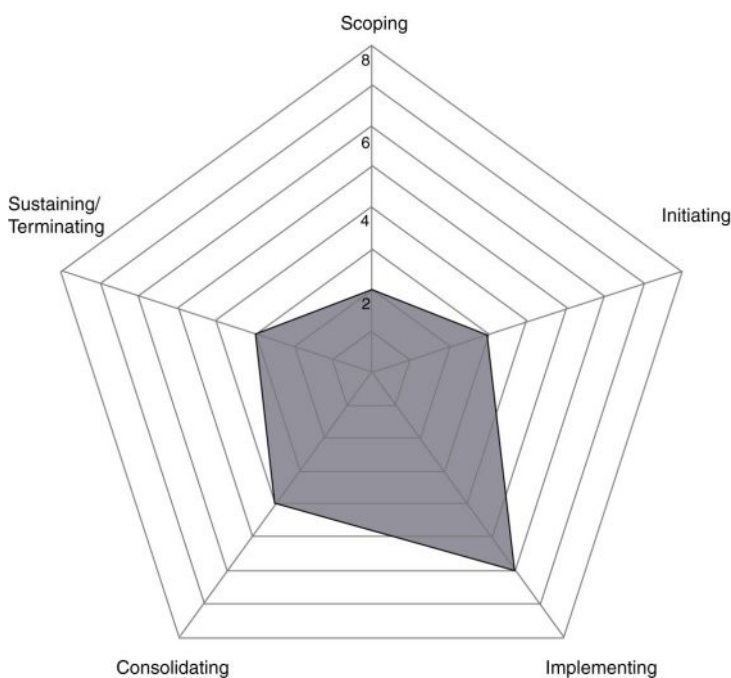


Tool 3: How is the community engaged in partnerships?

A range of techniques and methods have been developed to facilitate community engagement in partnership activities. These include consultations, meetings and the encouragement of networks, institutions, forums and focus groups as well as capacity-building, training and access to support and resources. Partnerships need to ensure that the most appropriate tools and mechanisms are used for specific contexts and purposes during the different phases of a partnership’s development so that they are employed appropriately and time and resources are in place for these.

Application

In order to examine the effectiveness of these choices it may be helpful to test the level of community engagement at each of the five development phases of a partnership using the following scale:



- 0 – no participation
- 1 – notified
- 2 – attended sessions
- 3 – able to express opinions (consulted)
- 4 – involved in the discussions (engaged)
- 5 – able to influence decision-making
- 6 – involved in decision-making ('has a vote')
- 7 – initiates a particular step or action point
- 8 – has final say/ control over action to be taken

Using the emerging wheel as a guide, discussion can be promoted around appropriate measures that may be taken to encourage greater involvement as the partnership develops and where this is most necessary. Once again, it is important to bear in mind that contextual issues will impact upon the usefulness of this tool and it may be necessary to use it at different intervals for different partnerships.

Tool 4: The community perspective

The tools outlined above concentrate on community engagement from the perspective of the partners involved in a particular partnership project or activity. However, it is also important that the community itself has a say in why it might want to work with a partnership. Community perception of a partnership's work over time may change considerably both in relation to perceptions of its success or failure at different stages as well as to who is involved in making this assessment.

Application

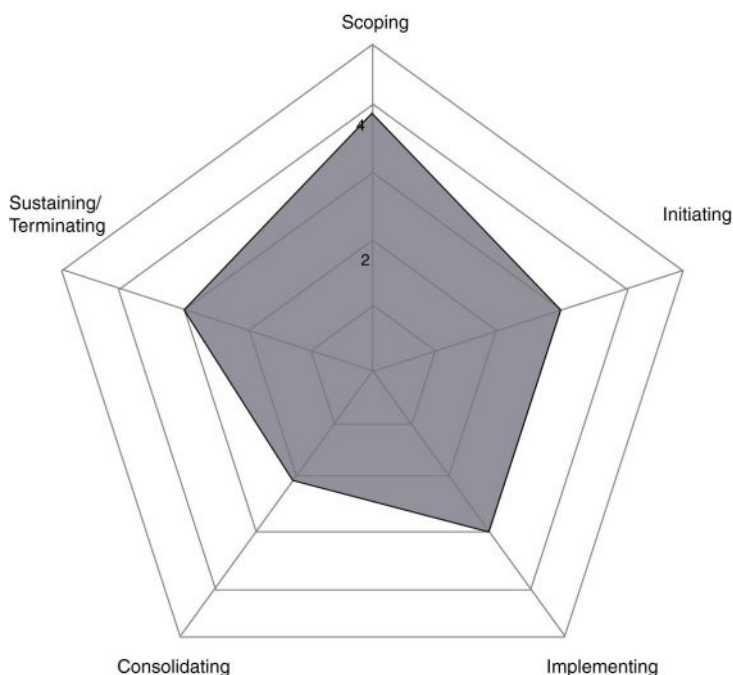
The tool outlined below uses the partnership phases as the spokes of the wheel and the following index to assess the community's sense of their engagement:

BOX 1 - Unpacking Low Participation

Each of the approaches hinges on community participation. It may be necessary to determine why certain groups that should (or ideally would) be participating are not. Some possible reasons include that they are:

- Indifferent (not interested because the benefits to them are unclear) and thereby incentives should be analysed;
- Intimidated (the nature of the partnership is not welcoming) and thereby institutional cultures should be investigated to see whether other means of engaging participants is possible (smaller group work, rotating chairs to share power, etc.)
- Disenfranchised (have they been asked to participate in the right way) and thereby need to understand whether, for example, more formal channels would be more appropriate;
- Incapable (they lack the resources – time, money, appropriate literacy level, etc.) and thereby the formal and informal criteria for participating should be unpacked; and/or
- Waiting (oftentimes stakeholders will wait in the wings for the right time to influence, obstruct, or otherwise) – this generally applies to more powerful stakeholder groups; seeing gaps in appropriate participation, it may be necessary to anticipate what it will take to bring the more powerful stakeholders in.

See forthcoming BPD note on the participation of the unwilling.



- 0 - no interest - fulfils no need
- 1 - offers opportunities for sharing opinions about service provision
- 2 - offers potential for better service provision
- 3 - potential to widen awareness through meetings and sharing across community
- 4 - offers useful capacity-building opportunities
- 5 - empowers by involving community in decision-making about its future

While accepting that ‘the community’ is not a cohesive unit and is cross-cut by a variety of issues relating to power that will impact upon the use of this tool, it may nonetheless help a partnership to ascertain where there are gaps in their work from the community’s point of view during the different phases of a partnership’s lifespan while offering the possibility for discussion on how to address these. NGO partners, some of whom may ‘represent’ the community in the partnership, might find this tool particularly useful in assisting them to assess how far they are genuinely able to speak on behalf of the community.

Conclusion

It is important to reinforce that the intention of these tools is to examine different perspectives contained both within and between partnerships in relation to the community. In this way partners can gain an understanding of why, with whom and to what extent community participation is useful at different phases of a partnership’s development. The scales presented here are indicative only and ideally would be developed by partnership participants based on local issues and perspectives. They are intended to be flexible and context specific; to be adapted and developed in line with local partnership concerns and the wider environment in which multi-stakeholder partnerships take place. BPD aims to trial them with a range of different partnership projects in order to explore the issue of community engagement more broadly. Readers are therefore encouraged to contribute comments and suggestions on this paper in order to progressively develop and refine the tools for this purpose.

Footnotes & Bibliography

ⁱ See for example the work of Robert Chambers in (1994) “Participatory Rural Appraisal (PRA): Analysis of Experience” in *World Development*, Vol.22, No.9 pp 1253-1268. and (1997) *Whose Reality Counts: Putting the Last First*, IT Publications, London

ⁱⁱ Kapoor suggests that “participation as empowerment” can quite easily slide into “participation as power” and that the drive to achieve ‘community consensus’ can often stifle a plurality of interests. Consensus may be moulded to fit bureaucratic or organisational needs and may ultimately benefit vested interest groups, be they external or local. See Kapoor, I. (2002) “The devil’s in the theory: A critical assessment of Robert Chamber’s work on participatory development” in *Third World Quarterly*, 23(1), 101-117 and Kapoor, I. (2004) “The Power of Participation, Participatory Development: A Promise Revisited” in *Current Issues in Comparative Education* [Online], Volume 6, Number 2, May 10, 2004 <http://www.tc.columbia.edu/cice/>

ⁱⁱⁱ See Cooke, B. & Kothari, M. (2001) *Participation: The New Tyranny*, Zed Books, London; and White, Sarah C. (1996) ‘Depoliticising development: the uses and abuses of participation’, *Development in Practice* 6 (1) 6-15

^{iv} Plummer, J. & Taylor, J.G. (2004) *Community Participation in China, Issues and Processes for Capacity Building*, Earthscan Publications

^v *ibid* p52-55