People, Partnerships, and Communities

The purpose of the People, Partnerships, and Communities series is to assist The Conservation Partnership to build capacity by transferring information about social science related topics

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Strengthening Public Involvement

Complex natural resource issues and concerns are inevitable in any community. A variety of state and Federal programs are designed to respond to natural resource needs within the parameters of limited budgets and changing political support. Oftentimes, there are conflicting demands for these resources and the Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) attempts to mediate between desires of the community and addressing the natural resources situation.

The ability to involve the public is critical for the NRCS and The Conservation Partnership to insure that affected parties are represented prior to developing and implementing natural resource plans and policies. According to the United States Department of Agriculture's Under Secretary for Natural Resources and Environment "workers will be increasingly involved in making public involvement processes function more effectively."[1] Public involvement is not new in Federal natural resource agencies. NRCS was founded on the principle of having local landowners identify their goals, assist in developing conservation alternatives, and make decisions to meet their goals.[2] Today the Agency, through locally led conservation and other processes, continues to utilize public involvement as a way to effectively help people conserve soil, water, and other resources.

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[1] Rey, Mark E. (2003). "The New Natural Resource Professional." *Journal of Soil and Water Conservation*. 58:5. p. 100a.

[2] Ibid.

What is Public Involvement?

Public involvement, also called stakeholder involvement, community involvement or public participation, is a systematic effort to structure communication between an agency or organization responsible for a decision and that organization's relevant public community.[3] In the Federal government sector, "public participation" is a term that has a specific meaning and one that has legal implications. Title 400 "Public Participation Coordination" in the NRCS General Manual provides specifics on public participation policy. Specific requirements and directions are also specified in the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), OMB Circular A-95, Executive Orders, Departmental memoranda, and NRCS policies. In this fact sheet, we will focus on the broader term of "public involvement."

Traditional purposes for involving citizens in decision-making include:[4]

1. Discovery—Gathering information from the community and developing a common language for discussing and defining problems, issues, and evaluation criteria
2. Education—Educating the public about an issue and proposed alternative
3. Measurement—Calculating public opinion with respect to their degree of support for a set of options
4. Persuasion—Influencing the public regarding a recommended alternative
5. Legitimization—Complying with public norms or legal requirements

In an effort to achieve these purposes, public involvement typically utilizes a variety of methods to communicate with a community. These methods include community meetings, surveys, focus groups, press releases, letter writing "comment" periods, field trips, open houses, collaborative brainstorming sessions, Web sites, interactive chat rooms, listening sessions, or any other mechanism which permits an interchange of ideas and data.

Why is Public Involvement Important?

Public involvement improves decision-making by providing the public with opportunities to express their views, prior to the development of a new conservation plan or policy.[5] It allows people from a variety of backgrounds and interests to participate in decisions that affect their community. In this way, public involvement embraces participatory democracy. Many locally led conservation initiatives are good examples of public involvement. These initiatives inform and educate citizens so they understand why specific proposals should be considered. Locally led planning can also inform the agency about individual or community opinions that might have otherwise been overlooked by only considering a limited number of perspectives. If public involvement is utilized effectively, it can reduce an "us versus them" dynamic and promote consensus, shared understanding, and collaboration. However, involving the public simply to fulfill legal requirements without considering their input is often worse than excluding the public altogether because it "poisons the agency's relationships with the public and dooms future programs."[6]

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[3] Walker, Gregg B. (1997). "Civic Discovery and the Three "Cs" of Public Participation: Consultation, Consensus, and Collaboration." p. 3 <www.baylor.edu/communication_conference/walker.pdf>. (17 November 2003).

[4] Walters, Lawrence C., James Aydelotte, & Jessica Miller. (2000). "Putting More Public in Policy Analysis." *Public Administration Review*. 60:4. p.2.

[5] NRCS General Manual, Title 400 – Public Participation Policy, Part 400.3

[6] Walters, Lawrence C., James Aydelotte, & Jessica Miller. (2000). "Putting More Public in Policy Analysis." *Public Administration Review*. 60:4. p.4.

Who is Involved?

A variety of individuals and organizations —stakeholders —should be included in any public involvement process. The NRCS General Manual Title 400 defines the public as individuals, permanent or ad hoc groups, and officials at all levels of government who have an interest in or may be affected by NRCS assisted activities.[7]

These individuals and groups might include:

- Agricultural organizations
- Chambers of Commerce
- Commodity groups
- Conservation districts
- Educational representatives
- Farmers and Ranchers
- Federal, state, and local elected government officials and staff
- Individual citizens with an interest in the issue
- Media
- Non-profits including conservation, environmental, consumer, and community service organizations
- Professional Groups
- Private sector business including Agribusiness
- RC&D Councils
- Watershed Groups
- Youth Groups

It is important to include people from a variety of cultures, ethnic and racial groups, and socioeconomic backgrounds. You should seek input that represents a cross-section of the community that may be affected. Additionally, it is important to include "resistors" in your public involvement process. Although having a variety of representative voices at the table may complicate the process, it also allows Agency staff to better understand the issues and concerns of the community. An overall goal is for the community and the Agency to craft a collective plan of action that addresses diverse community perspectives and improves environmental quality.[8]

The following questions can help you determine who should be involved:[9]

- Who in the community has a stake in this issue?
- How many sectors of the community should be represented?
- Does the representation in the group mirror the diversity in the community?
- Are underserved groups included?
- Is the representation broad enough to say there is an adequate community cross section?
- Are there resistors?

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[7] NRCS General Manual, Title 400 – Public Participation Policy, Part 400.1.

[8] Michigan State University Extension, Michigan State University, and USDA NRCS Social Sciences Institute. (2001). "Networks and Collaborations." *Developing Your Skills to INVOLVE COMMUNITIES in Implementing Locally Led Conservation.* P. 42.

[9] Ibid., p. 40.

Preparing to Meet with A Community Leader[10]

When you are gathering potential members for your public involvement initiative, it might be good to consider these general tips for meetings and encounters with community leaders:

- Request a meeting indicating the length of time needed. Confirm the meeting a few days prior, by telephone and/or e-mail.
- Research the organization or groups the leader is associated with. Be prepared to discuss these.
- If the leader is elected, find out the length of service, key policy interests, recent projects, etc. Consider if there are ways your organization can provide resources or technical assistance
- Consider the leader's personal style. Is s/he formal or informal in approach, social or the "down to business" type? Plan your communications accordingly.

At the meeting:

- Be on time. If you are delayed, call ahead.
- If the meeting is at your office, create a comfortable setting. A table is preferable, with direct eye contact for all in your seating arrangement.
- Dress in the manner you expect the leader to dress. If you are meeting in the field, you would not wear a suit; however, if s/he will be wearing business attire, you would want to do the same.
- Reaffirm the meeting's purpose at the beginning. Ask for opinions and ideas during the conversation.
- Bring one or two materials you think would be helpful. Share some resources and be sure to bring a business card.
- Follow up with a thank you note and send any information that you offered to send as a result of your meeting.

How Public Involvement Can Address Conservation Issues

Public involvement can be utilized to identify and prioritize natural resource issues during the natural resource planning, implementation, and evaluation processes.

Types of Public Involvement

When you consider involving the public in decision-making, it is also important to consider the type of public involvement that would be most effective. Walker outlines three types of public involvement within a decision-making context:

- Consultation – involves parties in the public policy making process without sharing any aspect of the decision itself
- Consensus – approval or the absence of active opposition by interested parties
- Collaboration – the process of joint decision-making among key individuals and organizations of a community about the future of that community

Knowing which type of public involvement strategy to utilize can help your initiative be more acceptable to the public. Traditionally, consultative methods have been the most common public involvement type. This method is efficient in terms of time and expense. However, consultation, with its emphasis on command and control communication, does not respond well to all dynamic and complex public policy situations.[11] The technique seeks to "inform and educate" while offering no guarantee of meaningful community input even though it invites feedback. Additionally, even if community members attend a public meeting, "given the proportion of people in whom such public speaking produces anxiety, it is likely that the quality and quantity of the comments is reduced."[12] Consultation emphasizes centralized decision-making and does not promote an on-going dialogue between the agency and the public.

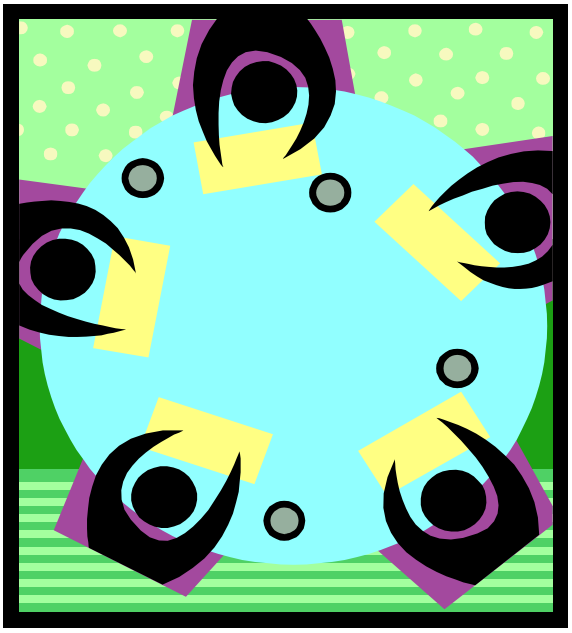
[10] NRCS Social Sciences Institute. (1998). "Requesting and Preparing for a Meeting with a Community Leader." *People, Partnerships, and Communities*, 17.

[11] Walker, Gregg B. (1997). "Civic Discovery and the Three "Cs" of Public Participation: Consultation, Consensus, and Collaboration." p. 3 <www.baylor.edu/communication_conference/walker.pdf>. (17 November 2003).

[12] Ibid.

Figure 1. The following table describes the characteristics of each type.[13]

Type	Consultation	Consensus	Collaboration
Goal	Information gathering and feedback	An outcome supported by all parties; full agreement	Fair, inclusive process; respectful interaction; mutual gains outcome
Decision-making	Little to no decision space; unilateral; retained by decision authority	Shared decision space as dictated by the decision authority	Shared decision space; shared by the decision authority; joint decision making
Participation	Structured by decision authority	Structured by the parties; controlled access	Accessible and inclusive
Negotiation	None	Likely, depending on procedural rules and interaction	Accessible and inclusive
Power and Control	Sought and maintained by the decision authority	Shared, as dictated by decision authority	Shared and negotiated
Philosophy	"Inform and Educate" "Command and Control"	"Full support of the agreement"	"Active learning-based participation"



Consensus is often difficult to achieve and usually refers to a type of decision rather than to a particular process. However, consensus achieved through collaboration allows the public and agency(s) to openly voice opinions, explore differences in values, identify and negotiate common interests and goals, and develop a shared vision. Joint decision-making utilizing a collaborative approach has proven to be more effective in ensuring the satisfaction of all parties involved. It channels the energy spent in conflict to a mode of working together to develop new approaches. Collaboration is an ongoing process based on learning and fact-finding by decision-making authorities and citizens.

Despite differences that may arise from dialogue and deliberation, creative and innovative outcomes may also occur.[14] Natural resource managers must be open to collaborative processes if they want to effectively achieve public involvement and promote individual community capacity building. (Visit the National Association of Conservation Districts Web site at www.nacdnet.org/publications/brochures.html for information about capacity building tools.)

[13] Daniels, S.E. & Walker, G.B. (2001). Working *Through Environmental Policy Conflict: The Collaborative Learning Approach.* Westport: Praeger.

[14] Walker, Gregg B. (1997). "Civic Discovery and the Three "Cs" of Public Participation: Consultation, Consensus, and Collaboration." p. 3 <www.baylor.edu/communication_conference/walker.pdf>. (17 November 2003).

Keys to Successful Collaboration[15]

These ten concepts can help you improve your collaboration initiatives:

- **Good timing and clear need** – Projects should be initiated in a timely manner when stakeholders are ready to act in response to a clear need. There is also a sense of urgency in the situation.

- **Strong and diverse stakeholder groups** – Groups should represent many people and/or organizations. The members should be well organized and capable of speaking and acting credibly for the interests they represent.

- **Broad-based involvement** – Participants should represent a cross-section of the community, as opposed to few participants predominantly from one section.

- **Credibility and openness of process** – The process needs to be viewed as credible by the participants. It is considered fair when it is not dominated by a particular group. Members also participate in the decision-making or in providing input that influences decisions. The process must be open in that community members are free to participate, as they feel necessary, and important stakeholders are not excluded from the process.

- **Commitment and/or involvement of high-level, visible leaders** – Efforts should be supported directly and indirectly by high level leaders, i.e., mayors, state conservationists, chief executive officers, and executive directors.

- **Support of "established" authorities or powers** – Entities like city councils, chambers of commerce, and watershed groups can agree to support and abide by the recommendations of the community groups arrived at through the collaborative process. The likelihood that they will support a decision is higher because their constituencies are represented in the process.

- **Overcoming mistrust and skepticism** – Initial skepticism by some community stakeholder groups is inevitable. Skepticism and mistrust should diminish overtime.

- **Strong leadership of process** – Successful leaders keep stakeholders at the table through periods of frustration and skepticism, help them negotiate difficult points, and enforce group norms and ground rules.

- **Interim successes** – The effort should acknowledge interim successes along the way. Take time to celebrate even small successes. This will sustain credibility and momentum.

- **A shift to broader concerns** – As the effort evolves, participants should dwell less on narrow, parochial interests and more on the broader interests of the community. The group will eventually recognize their ability to collaborate as equal partners rather than advocates of particular interests.

[15] Chrislip, David D. & Carl E. Larson. (1994). *Collaborative Leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, p. 51-54.

Steps to Strengthen Public Involvement

In his book entitled The Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook, David D. Chrislip provides a "Guide to the Practices of Successful Collaboration." [16] He suggests four broad steps: getting started, setting up for success, working together, and moving to action. The action items under each step are displayed in Figure 2.

Figure 2.

Getting Started

Analyzing the Context for Collaboration
1. Understanding the political dynamics
2. Understanding how citizens think about public issues

Deciding on a Collaborative Strategy
1. Determining the feasibility of collaboration
2. Defining the purpose, scope, and focus

Setting Up for Success

Identifying and Convening Stakeholders
1. Understanding the principle and practice of inclusion
2. Finding the credibility to convene
3. Identifying stakeholders
4. Inviting, recruiting, and convening stakeholders

Designing a constructive process
1. Defining the decision-making method
2. Establishing ground rules
3. Designing a constructive process

Defining Information Needs
1. Defining information and education needs

Defining Critical Roles
1. Selecting process experts
2. Selecting content experts
3. Identifying strong, facilitative leaders

Managing the Process
1. Establishing a steering committee
2. Staffing the effort
3. Documenting the process

Finding the Resources
1. Developing a budget
2. Funding a collaborative process

Working Together

Building Capacity
1. Building relationships and skills

Ways of Engaging
1. Engaging through dialogue
2. Working with written information

Informing the Stakeholders
1. Understanding the content
2. Understanding the context
   - Analyzing strengths and weaknesses, opportunities, and threats
   - Developing scenarios

Deciding What Needs to Be Done
1. Collaborative problem solving
2. Visioning
3. Strategic planning

Moving to Action

Reaching Out
1. Building a broader constituency
2. Engaging with decision makers and implementing organizations

Managing Action
1. Developing action plans
2. Organizing and managing implementation

[16] Chrislip, David D. (2002). *The Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook.* San Fransico: Jossey-Bass, p. 64.

Public involvement is an important process that can benefit the sponsoring agency(s) and the community. It uses the notion of **participatory democracy** to develop and implement long and short term conservation plans and public policies. The public involvement process can achieve **comprehensive communication** between an agency(s) and the community by developing strategies that enable community members to understand the environmental, economic, and social costs and benefits of proposed actions. In return, suggestions and recommendations developed through the public involvement process can help technical experts understand local attitudes and values. Remaining true to the process also enables **effective decision-making** by balancing extreme positions with all relevant options and alternatives. In the end, there is potential for **political legitimacy** because community members are more likely to "buy-in" to a decision after they've participated in its development.[17]

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Where can I find more Information?

The NRCS Social Sciences Institute (SSI) has a fact sheet series entitled *People, Partnerships, and Communities*. Examples of fact sheet topics include Requesting and Preparing for a Meeting with a Community Leader, Working with Community Leaders, and Developing and Maintaining a Network. These and additional titles are available on the SSI Web site at www.ssi.nrcs.usda.gov.
Click on the Fact Sheets link.

Additionally, SSI has a training series entitled, *Developing Your Skills to INVOLVE COMMUNTIES in Implementing Locally Led Conservation*. Nine modules are available and contain topics like Networks and Collaborations, Addressing Community Issues, Community Issues Identification, etc. To request the modules, contact the Community Planner at (616) 942-1503.

To access the NRCS General Manual Title 400 – Public Participation Policy, visit the NRCS Directives Web site at http://policy.nrcs.usda.gov/scripts/lpsiis.dll/GM/GM_400.htm.

The Amherst Wilder Foundation has a variety of useful tools for use in collaboration including:

- Amherst H. Wilder Foundation. (1992). *Collaboration: What Makes it Work*. St. Paul: Publishing Center, Amherst Wilder Foundation.
- Winer, Michael & Karen Ray. (2000). *Collaboration Handbook*: *Creating, Sustaining, and Enjoying the Journey*. St. Paul: Publishing Center, Amherst Wilder Foundation.

These books and articles on collaboration also contain useful information:

- Chrislip, David. D. (2002). *The Collaborative Leadership Fieldbook*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Chrislip, David D. & Carl E. Larson. (1994). *Collaborative Leadership: How Citizens and Civic Leaders Can Make a Difference*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Daniels, S.E. & Walker, G.B. (2001). Working *Through Environmental Policy Conflict: The Collaborative Learning Approach*. Westport: Praeger.
- Howell, Robert E., Marvin E. Olsen, & Darryll Olsen. (1987). *Designing a Citizen Involvement Program*. Corvallis: Western Rural Development Center. p. 1-2.
- Walker, Gregg. B. (1997). "Civic Discovery and the Three "Cs" of Public Participation: Consultation, Consensus, and Collaboration." <www.baylor.edu/communication_conference/walker.pdf>. (17 November 2003).
- Walters, Lawrence C., James Aydelotte, & Jessica Miller. (2000). "Putting More Public in Policy Analysis." *Public Administration Review*. 60:4. p.4.

[17] Howell, Robert E., Marvin E. Olsen, & Darryll Olsen. (1987). *Designing a Citizen Involvement Program*. Corvallis: Western Rural Development Center. p. 1-2.