

## **1. Overview**

Community engagement is a broad term that covers different types of activities. In recent years, community engagement is considered an important policy tool to achieve specific goals. It allows individuals, community organizations and different levels of governments to work together in policy planning and implementation. It is no doubt that community engagement can play a vital role in developing local governance capacity, especially in neighborhood planning and implementation. However, it is still a difficult task to engage community from planning level to implementation level of government programs. In this paper, attempt has been made to address the conceptual issues of community engagement as well as several levels and models of community engagement and its application in national and international contexts. This paper has answered the questions why community engagement is useful and how can we engage people to most effectively address neighborhood planning. The paper also suggests some recommendations for community engagement in neighborhood planning.

## **2. Conceptualizing Community**

Defining the concept of community is a difficult task. It is considered to be 'fluid' concept and one's definition of community might not match with others (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006). From the sociological viewpoint, it can be said that, "the notion of community refers to a group of people united by at least one common characteristic. Such characteristics could include geography, shared interests, values, experiences, or traditions" (Centre for Disease Control and Prevention, 2006:2).

In a report on "Community Engagement", Government of Manchester (UK) has categorized community from two broad perspectives. These include:

- **Community of Place:** people within a defined geographical area, for example a housing estate or particular neighborhood.
- **Community of Interest:** also known as ‘interest groups’ these are people who share a particular experience, interest or demographic characteristic, for example: young people, disabled people, the working population, ethnic minorities (Government of Manchester, 2006: 53)

It is important to note here that one individual could be the member of different communities due to one’s choice or because of age, gender, race or ethnicity. Therefore, specific policy would focus on specific community.

### 3. Understanding Community Engagement

Community engagement is a broad term for its diverse range of application. There is no “unique” consensus in defining community engagement. A report of Queensland Government (2006) states: “Community engagement refers to the connections between the governments, citizens and communities on a range of policy, program and service issues. It encompasses a wide variety of government-community interactions ranging from information sharing to community consultation and in some instances, active participation in government decision-making process” (Queensland Government, 2006: 5). It is also believed that community engagement often involves partnerships that facilitate to mobilize resources and influence system of public sector, change relationships among partners, and also could serve as “catalysts” in changing policies and programs (Fawcett et al., 1995).

In essence, it can be said that community engagement is a wide process through diverse activities that ensure community participation in planning and implementation level goal achievement.

Different countries follow different levels of community engagement in neighborhood planning.

Several principles and practices are drawn based on the level of community engagement.

Generally the following levels of engagement are found:

Levels of Engagement	
Information	A one way relationships in which government delivers information to citizens <b>Government</b> → <b>Citizen</b>
Consultation	A two-way relationship in which citizens provide feedback on issues defined by government <b>Government</b> ↔ <b>Citizen</b>
Active Participation	A collaboration in which citizens actively shape policy options, but where government retains the responsibility for final decisions <b>Government</b> ↔ <b>Citizen</b>

*(Source: Queensland Government, 2006)*

From this diagram, it can be said, “information, consultation and active participation are community engagement continuum, with increasing levels of engagement and influence” (Queensland Government, 2006: 5).

On the other hand, the Government of Manchester (UK) suggests six level of community engagement. These include:

<b>Levels of Community engagement</b>	<b>Purposes</b>
Informing people	Providing information to people which eventually underpins every other level of engagement
Researching needs, priorities and attitudes	Using research methods and technique to understand needs and priorities
Consulting and learning	Seeking the views and opinions of individuals and groups to inform the decision-making process
Involving communities	Involving communities in decisions that affect their lives and the future of their neighborhoods
Devolving decisions	Engaging communities is to provide information and resources while leaving them to make their own decisions
Supporting hands on community decision	Helping communities to develop their own plans and to put them into action with minimal ‘professional’ help

Adapted from Government of Manchester (2006)

Literature shows that there is no ‘hard and fast’ rule for the levels of community engagement; it mainly depends on situation and the decision of the concern government.

#### **4. Different Models of Community Engagement**

Generally the models of community engagement have been developed from the perspective of different level on the ‘ladder of participation’. Hashagen (2002) recommends six models can be useful for community engagement.

Models of Community Engagement	Description
Consultation /public Participation models	Public organizations generally use this kind of models to elicit views and opinions from a wide range of community members on needs, issues or responses to proposals. Opinion polls, surveys, workshops, focus groups, open space events would be useful techniques.
Asset-based/social economy models	These models are used to recognize the value of the physical assets and human resources of a community and main objectives of these models to maximize the community control over and benefit from these assets. Community based housing association, community trust forestry are some examples of these models.
Community democracy models	These models help to extend local democracy into the community through developing an ‘informal’ tier of government. Community councils might work in this way.
Identity based models	These models are used as a means of finding and expressing a voice. Black and ethnic minority communities, and disabled groups have developed these models
Learning-led and popular education models	These models help to build and support the skills and confidence of community members.
Service development models	These models are used to provide direct responses to gaps in public service provision or to identify local needs.

Adapted from Hashagen (2002)

Apart from these, Canadian Policy Research Network (CPRN) (1999) suggests ”Policy Dialogue Process Model” to engage community in policy process. CPRN used this model to discuss policy issues with 3000 Canadians (Tamarack, 2006). In practice, these models sometimes overlap and some municipal governments use the combination of models to ensure

community engagement. No model is universal. Every model has weakness and benefits to involve community.

## **5. Benefits of Community Engagement**

In recent year, there is a growing concern about “democratic deficit” which “is seen as a problem partly because it creates a break down in trust between the public and their politicians and a growing cynicism about politicians’ standards of behavior” (Joyce, 1999: 141). It is also believed that community engagement would be seen as a way to reduce democratic deficit and to re-establish the “connection” between politicians and public (Joyce, 1999).

Community engagement in policy making is an important part of good governance, and “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 the government –community engagement” (Community Economic Development Action Research, 2006:1).

From the governance perspective, it is felt that “public services have been used by governments to solve society’s problems and meet a public needs and that this is no longer sufficient” (Joyce, 1999). Moreover, governments are increasingly confronting ‘complexity, dynamics and diversity’ in strategic planning and management for public services. As Kooiman and Vliet (1993) believe “searching for alternative modes of governing and governance in which interactions between government and society, between public and private actors are central...” (Kooiman and Vliet, 1993: 58).

In recent years, community expectation for the City programs is comparatively higher than before. “There is a continuous pressure on governments to deliver increased efficiencies through more tailored and better coordinated policies, programs and services” (Queensland Government, 2006: 7).

Furthermore, community engagement in strategic planning and management is essential because of “acknowledgement of the challenges of rapid social change and of the need to bridge the gap between the well-off and the well-connected, and the socially and economically disadvantaged” (Queensland Government, 2006: 4).

Local knowledge and experience is also crucial for neighborhood planning. Without extensive community engagement in planning and policy process, it is hard to make local level decisions. Considering this view, most of the authorities in the Cities are engaging community in policy and decision-making.

Changing relationship among people and governments has demanded citizen engagement. Public is interchangeably with such term as: ‘client’, ‘customer’, ‘consumer’ or citizens (Burns et al. 1994). The “we know best” tendency of professional officers has changed due to “consider the public as citizens” notion. Burns et al (1994) sketched the changing role of public as client, customer, consumer and citizen at the level of policy influence on government institutions.

Description of member of the public	The relationship is strongly shaped by
Clients	The dominance of the clients by the professional
Customers	The experience of customers in using the organization
Consumer	The interest of the consumer in the product or service provided
Citizen	The concern of the citizen to influence public decisions which affect the local quality of life

*Source: Burns et al (1994)*

Internationally the shifts of governments from a “top-down” approach to “networked governance” acknowledge the importance of partnership with individuals, communities or private sectors (Queensland Government, 2006). Community engagement is considered important practice of “networked governance”.

## **6. Challenges and Experiences of Community Engagement**

It is hard to reach and engage full spectrum of community interests. Moreover, there are considerable debates in selecting or electing the Community Representatives (CRs). Another growing concern is the accountability of these community representatives to the people. Lack of ‘speciality’ and inadequate ‘interest’ of these CRs are very common. If this is the case, community engagement may not be fruitful to achieve its ultimate goals.

It is also complicated to balance broader community good with individual needs. Boarder community may sometimes impede the individual’s needs. There have been a number of



community engagement programs in the City of Ottawa, a lack of ‘co-ordination’ and ‘co-operation’ are found in these programs. Shortage of staff and policy guideline are main constraints in this regards.

The ultimate challenge of community engagement is to have a well accepted “process” that would ensure the municipality and the community work collaboratively, informing and stimulating mutual learning. As some people believe, “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” (Community Economic Development Action Research, 2006: 6).

It is true that engaging community in municipal level is a lengthy and also sometimes “time consuming” process. As Bryson noticed: “ More time will need to be spent organizing forums for discussion , involving diverse communities , negotiating agreements in existing or new arenas , and coordinating the activities and actions of numerous relatively independent people, groups, organizations and institutions” ( Bryson, 1995: 6).

Lastly, some other challenges such as the level at which engagement takes place, the best practices of engagement, how to address the various interests and expectations, both realistic and unrealistic, and how the feedback of engagement will inform policy and decision-making of Municipal Governments.

## 7. Final Reflections

Community engagement programs should follow some key principles. These include:

- The focus and purpose of community engagement programs should be clear and flexible.
- It is essential to select the proper model of community engagement which would suit with the objectives and goals of the program
- Community engagement is a lengthy process and it follows several steps. It is worthwhile to start engaging community in planning level rather than in implementation level.
- Generally community engagement requires long time to achieve its goals. The commitment to continue the long period of engagement process should be clarified from the outset.
- From the planning level, evaluation and monitoring activity of community engagement program should be taken into account.
- It is important to justify the reasons in selecting certain or a particular or a specific target community and what maximum benefit can be achieved for this target community.
- The communication with community should be clear and lucid. It is reasonable to avoid 'jargons' and 'abbreviations'.
- Community engagement program should have all facilities which would allow community to engage comfortably.

## References