**Community Participation in Social Planning**

* **Community participation makes it more likely that you'll come up with policy that's effective.**

Without the knowledge of the history and social structure of the community that community members can contribute, there's a risk of serious error. Attempting to repeat something that didn't work in the past, or assuming that particular groups will work together, when actually they've been at odds for years, can undermine a community development effort before it starts. Furthermore, community members can inform policymakers and planners of the real needs of the community, so that the most important problems and issues can be addressed.

* **Community participation leads to community ownership and support of whatever initiatives come out of a social planning effort.**

When people have a hand in planning and decision-making, they feel that whatever plan is implemented is theirs, and therefore they'll strive to make it work. The same is rarely, if ever, true about plans that are imposed on a community from outside.

* **Policymakers - particularly elected officials - can gain politically from involving the community.**

They will be seen as respecting their constituents, and will also gain respect and credibility if initiatives they sponsor prove effective. If they can help improve the quality of life for community members, their political capital will increase.

* **Community members can inform policymakers about changes in circumstances that demand changes in policy over time.**

What is effective or appropriate today may not be in five years. Community participation puts eyes and ears in the community to pick up changes that policymakers may not be aware of, and to keep programs and initiatives from becoming outmoded or stale.

* **Community participation can create community relationships and partnerships among diverse groups who can then work together.**

By involving all sectors of the community, it can bring together groups and individuals who would normally not have - or might not want - contact with one another, and help them understand where their common interests lie.

* **Community participation helps keep community building going over the long run.**

By placing planning and decision-making power partly or wholly with the community, the process assures that those who started the effort will remain interested and involved, and not be distracted by other issues, or by changes in the political climate.

• **Participation provides the opportunity to educate policymakers to the community's real needs and concerns.**

As we've discussed, when policymakers plan a vacuum, their plans usually fail, because they don't account for the realities of the situation and the real needs of the population they're aimed at. Community members can help policymakers understand their lives - the difficulties they face, the strengths they bring, and what they feel must be addressed.

• **Participation allows community members to help create policy that really works to meet their needs.**

By participating in their development, community members can see policies put in place that actually improves their lives, rather than having no effect or imposing added burdens on them.

• **Participation affords community members the respect they deserve.**

Rather than being seen as victims or nuisances, community members engaged in a participatory social planning process are seen as colleagues and concerned citizens working to improve their community. They are respected both as human beings - as should always be the case, but often isn't - and for the skills, knowledge, and effort they contribute to the process.

• **Participation puts community members in control of their own fate.**

The participatory social planning and policy development process results in citizens deciding what policies will work for them, and gives them the opportunity to change those policies if they're not working. It puts into practice the motto of the Back of the Yards Neighborhood Council in Chicago, founded by legendary organizer Saul Alinsky: "We, the people, will work out our own destiny."

• Participation builds community leadership from within. Those who take part in the process both learn and exercise leadership skills, and also start to see themselves as having the capacity to be leaders. The most important step to leadership, and to taking action to influence events that affect you, is to believe that you have the ability to do so.

• Participation energizes the community to take on other issues or policy decisions in the future, and to see itself as in control of its future. Thus, the community development process will continue over time.

• Participation leads to long-term social change.

As community members take more control over more areas of their lives, as a result of the skills and attitudes gained from the participatory process, they will create and institutionalize changes that improve the quality of life for everyone in the community.

"Community participation" can mean different things to policymakers and to community activists. As discussed briefly above, policymakers can pay lip service to community participation while getting around it or ignoring it. There are, in fact, levels of community participation, and each might be appropriate at different times and in different circumstances.