

Public participation and community engagement for water resource management in the Pacific

Helen Ross, Bronwyn Powell and Suzanne Hoverman

There are several terms representing ways in which governments or other organisations can work with the public. The purpose of this brief is to summarise recent thinking on two of these, *public participation* and *community engagement*, as an aid to Pacific government agencies and non-government organisations working in water resources management. A companion brief explains options for one of the strongest forms of public participation, collaborative management.

Background

The terms ‘public participation’ and ‘community engagement’ are often used synonymously, but there are some differences. The older term ‘public participation’ refers mainly to government, or sometimes private companies, sharing their decision-making roles with the public. This covers occasional consultation, to extended arrangements of sharing management responsibilities. The term ‘community engagement’ covers similar ideas, but also extends to situations in which government (or industry) might not be the sole decision-maker or ‘manager’. The focus is on processes and practices in which a wide range of people work together to achieve a shared goal guided by a commitment to a common set of values, principles and criteria, and particularly on motivating the public to take action (Aslin and Brown, 2005, p. 3). ‘Community engagement’ thus motivates people to do more than share a decision, and it applies well on issues in which government is not the sole decision-maker.

Water issues that may require public participation

It is important to manage surface and ground water in the Pacific for a range of human uses and environmental needs. As economic development demands increase and human populations grow, the potential for conflict between water uses, and

activities affecting water, increases. Pressure points include:

- *Water for the environment* – providing sufficient habitat for aquatic species, so as not to threaten other natural resources including fish, and riverine plants and the animals that depend on them;
- *Domestic water supplies and sanitation* – keeping supplies unpolluted, plentiful, and affordable both for households and the supply instrumentalities; achieving safe sanitation so that human health and environment are not compromised by unsafe disposal of wastes;
- *Water for agriculture* – storage for inter-seasonal availability and irrigation systems. An issue is competition between water needs for irrigation and for direct human consumption (or environmental needs). There is a risk of agricultural demand exceeding the supplies available, and indeed for development advisers to be insufficiently informed about water demand and availability;
- *Water for secondary and tertiary industry* – from factories to golf courses, development can also extend demands on both water quantity, and quality. Challenges arise where water consumption is high, or industry processes pollute water supplies;
- *Managing conflicting interests* both in the planning stages for new development and in response to population growth (including population redistribution or urbanisation).

Reasons for public participation and community engagement

Public participation has been well accepted internationally in environmental management and planning for at least 40 years. The reasons are:

- *The opportunity to make better decisions*, by opening up the decision-making process to a wide set of people contributing expertise that lies outside government. This includes local experience, traditional knowledge, and different forms of technical knowledge.
- *Better public acceptance of and compliance with the decisions made*, because people have had the opportunity to be heard in the information gathering stages of decision-making. (Even if some people disagree with the eventual decision, they may comply with it if satisfied with the process of reaching it).
- *Social justice*, the idea that those who will be affected by a decision deserve to have input.

In addition to the reasons for public participation, community engagement enables the public to go beyond *participation* in a decision to be made by government, to become *motivated* to support a new perspective or issue and take action themselves. For example, it could foster willingness to change agricultural practices to avoid soil erosion and water pollution, or to change fishing practices to maintain fish stocks and conserve species. Where people are motivated to change their own practices, they can often achieve far more than is possible through government legislation, policies or programs alone.

Degrees of public participation and engagement

A popular idea is the ‘ladder’ of public participation, first set out by the American Planner Sherry Arnstein (1969), see figure 1. This related to participation in government-led planning. It ranged from no participation, or government consulting the public but not necessarily heeding their advice (tokenistic participation), to complete and equal sharing of decisions or community control. The idea has since been elaborated by others, with small differences. Wondolleck et al (1996) pointed out that the stronger forms of participation are not necessarily preferable to those lower on the ladder, as communities and organisations can find themselves overloaded in participating on issues that are not necessarily important to them. Ross et al (2002) also noted that the ladder idea, focused on sharing power, does not cater well for the community-based types of participation in natural resource management

which occur in developing countries. Here the emphasis may be on fostering, strengthening or restoring community-based action and collective approaches to natural resource management, and increasingly on government/community partnerships.

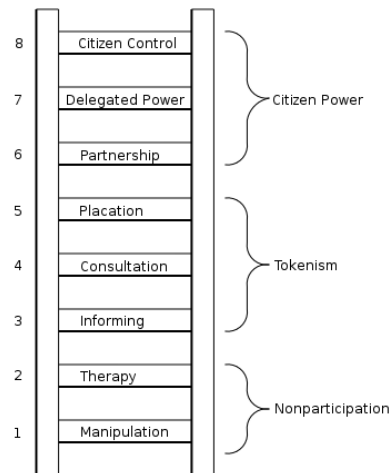


Figure 1: The ladder of public participation (Arnstein 1969)

Ross and colleagues (2002) argue that sharing decision-making is not just about sharing power or roles, as the ladder idea suggests. The types and degree of sharing between government and public should vary according to the issue and circumstances. Other factors to consider in designing an appropriate participation process include:


- *Agency* –which party carries the initiative in such processes?
- *Tenure* –the nature of the respective parties’ control over the resources (including shared or unclear responsibilities);
- *The nature of the participants* – are there many or few parties? Are they included because of their resource ownership or stakeholder role, or voluntary and self-selected? Is the ‘public’ party an organised group (that is easily contacted) or otherwise?
- *Task* –is the need for policy making, planning or on-going management; strategic decisions or on-ground works?

- *Duration* – is the task for a fixed period of time, or intended to continue? Therefore are long- or short-term processes needed?

Of course some of these factors are interdependent, for instance *duration* with *the nature of the task*; *agency* with *tenure*.

The International Association for Public Participation (known as IAP2) presents a ‘spectrum’ of public participation, with increasing levels of public impact as the processes move from informing through consulting, involving, to collaborating and empowering (see box 1).

Figure 2: IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum (IAP2 2006)



INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
Participation goal				
To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problems, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution	To place final decision-making in the hands of the public
Promise to the public				
We will keep you informed	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision	We will look to you for direct advice and Innovation in formulating solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible	We will implement what you decide

How to have an effective participation process

There is a large body of international experience on good processes for public participation and community engagement. It is particularly important that the processes be well designed, and be followed with genuine intent to listen to the public and – we hope – take their advice. Key considerations are:

- *Be inclusive* – the processes should be open to all relevant members of society, including women, all age sets, and social or cultural minorities. The processes should be comfortable for the people involved. They should suit their cultures, languages, and convenience, and be

held in locations where they feel at ease to speak freely. If the processes are not comfortable or convenient, some people will not attend, or they will not speak up.

- *Balance out differences in power* as much as possible through preparation of the parties, providing the disadvantaged with resources, and facilitating discussions to encourage the less advantaged to speak out.
- *Allow enough time* for the process, so that all can be reached, and heard. People may need extra time, and repeated visits, to understand

complex issues sufficiently, or to talk among themselves between formal discussions;

- *Facilitation* – a neutral facilitator, or team of facilitators combining process skills and knowledge of the issue, can assist the process;
- *Capacity building* – some or all parties may need some assistance in order to participate effectively, through preparatory briefing and discussion;
- *Identifying benefits* for the participants – it is important to consider each participant's perspective: why should they participate, how can they gain from having a say?
- *Sufficient resourcing* to conduct the process well, and enable people to participate (for example, travel costs, replaced wages if taking time off work, child care).

Practitioners generally agree that there is no single 'recipe' for a good participation process: it is best to customise according to the circumstances. It is particularly useful to seek and accept local advice while designing the process.

Why use community engagement processes for land and water management in the Pacific?

The management of water resources, and the land uses that affect water quantity and quality, are both complex issues. In most cases complex landscapes, under different forms of ownership and control, are involved. This can include customary land ownership, customary water rights, and even common property rights and responsibilities over water. In such cases no party - neither government nor customary owners - may have total control of the natural resources, or the outcomes of different ways of using them. It makes sense to cooperate in order to achieve sound management of water, from which all parties benefit.

When could community engagement be useful in the Pacific?

All forms of public participation and community engagement are potentially useful, for different circumstances. Opportunities to use these approaches in the Pacific could include:

- Government consulting communities about how to manage water better, or how to plan future land uses in order to limit negative effects on water resources;
- Government or NGOs trying to engage communities in improving land use practices and water use practices, to achieve cleaner water or more equitable and efficient distribution while also achieving community goals for poverty alleviation or development;
- Negotiated shared arrangements for an aspect of water management. This could include integrated catchment (watershed) management;
- Public-private infrastructure development (for example for irrigation) between government and farmers, government and private developers.

Concluding comments

An appropriately chosen level of public participation will improve most decision-making processes. The type and extent of participation depends on the issues to be discussed or managed, and the context. The idea of community engagement takes the idea of public participation further, by focusing on the community becoming motivated to take action itself.

References

Arnstein, SR 1969, 'A Ladder of Citizen Participation', *Journal of the American Institute of Planners*, 35 (2), 216-24.

Aslin, HJ & Brown, VA 2004, *Towards Whole of Community Engagement: A Practical Toolkit*, Murray-Darling Basin Commission, Canberra, Australia., viewed 18 May 2008, <www.mdbc.gov.au/_data/page/1071/ToolkitFinal.pdf>

International Association for Public Participation 2006, *IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum*. IAP2, Colorado, USA, viewed 15 May 2008., <<http://www.iap2.org>>

Ross, H, Buchy, M. & Proctor, W. 2002, 'Laying down the ladder: a typology of public participation in Australian natural resource management', *Australian Journal of Environmental Management* 9, 4, 205-217.

Wondolleck, J. M., Manring, N. J. & Crowfoot, J. E. 1996. 'Teetering at the top of the ladder: the experience of citizen group participants in alternative dispute resolution processes', *Sociological Perspectives*, 39 (2): 249-62

Contacts:

Professor Helen Ross, Helen.Ross@uq.edu.au;
Bronwyn Powell, b.powell@watercentre.org

