

# BonaMUN 2017: Research Report – SpC

<b>Forum:</b>	Special Conference
<b>Issue:</b>	Engage communities in discussions and planning for improvement of their cities
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## Introduction

As more people choose to live in cities, local governments find themselves facing increasingly complex issues in city-making. Demands for affordable housing and public transit, tensions around gentrification and density, even connecting the dots between city planning and climate change, are just some of the more high-profile critical conversations our cities need. Solutions can come from many places, but smart cities realize that engaging the broad public in the city-making process leads to better answers and a deeper public ownership of our future.

Faced with this knowledge, cities are struggling to develop new and innovative community engagement methods, including those that embrace new technologies, social media, and collaborative design methods, to better bring the public into conversations on the future of city life. Let's face it, not all of our engagement in recent decades has been very engaging!

## Definition of Key Terms

### Community engagement

The process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioural changes

### Social planning

The process by which policymakers - legislators, government agencies, planners, and, often, funders - try to solve community problems or improve conditions in the community by devising and implementing policies intended to have certain results. These policies may take the form of laws, regulations, incentives, media campaigns, programs or services, information - a wide range of possibilities.

## Background Information

Effective community engagement allows you to take advantage of the community's good ideas, address concerns early, and head off potential problems. Engaging the people who live in the affected community allows them to participate in the shaping of their community. It also helps you to be successful, since community members may try to stop decisions they don't like.

Engagement can happen in many ways: through quasi-governmental entities such as volunteer planning commissions; non-governmental organizations such as community health councils; and community-led processes such as door-to-door surveys. Through engagement, stakeholders learn information, provide valuable input and data, offer solutions, question assumptions, and communicate with neighbours.

The phrase "community engagement" causes considerable confusion for it is often used as an umbrella term to cover the whole range of public involvement and consultation. In fact it has a more precise meaning, and refers to those actions and processes which take place to establish an effective relationship with individual and organisational stakeholders. This phase is critical, as the future conduct of consultations and other forms of interaction depend upon the nature of the relationship, and the expectations set at the beginning. From time to time, it is necessary to re-engage with those who have ceased to participate, and on every occasion, the basis of trust between the parties is of paramount importance. It is especially important to ensure engagement with hard-to-reach and other community groups which have traditionally been neglected.

Meaningful public input provides the framework of quality planning and project development. Facilitators of public decision-making processes must ensure equal opportunity for meaningful participation. Cities and counties that seek early and ongoing input from the affected interests are more effective at delivering projects and services to the people they serve. Meaningful engagement ensures accountability, effective communications and consistency.

Furthermore, there is a need to redress the balance of public involvement and to make greater efforts to hear the views of people and groups that have been traditionally under represented. The planning system can be inaccessible to such interest groups, and local planning departments may have limited experience of the particular skills and techniques of engaging with them. Many hard-to-reach groups have a limited capacity for involvement and are facing engagement initiatives from several quarters. Making progress in this area therefore requires high levels of co-ordination with other local authority departments and strong working relationship.

From an economic point of view, we see that one essential economic development tool that may often be underused is public engagement is involving community members in charting a path to shared prosperity and an improved quality of life. Engaging the public in an authentic and practical way can help develop a shared understanding of local economic development policies and programs, increasing their potential effectiveness and impact over time. Because local challenges

and opportunities are as varied as individual communities, engaging the public can help ensure that the economic development strategy aligns with the community's needs. Engaging the public in local economic development can help build support for the adoption and implementation of future initiatives. Economic development is often an elusive and difficult challenge for communities because it relies on a large number of interrelated factors. Physical infrastructure, human capital and entrepreneurial support networks all play a part to determining the overall economic health of a city. Public engagement provides opportunities to improve each of these areas using the collective wisdom and insight of the residents who will be most directly affected by the success or failure of any economic development plan.

## Possible Solutions

As this issue is quite broad, one must also make sure to think broad. Community engagement works best where it is an ongoing cumulative process enabling relationships and trust to build and strengthen over time. Individual engagement events should be planned and designed with this in mind and aim to contribute to the overall aims of the engagement process. Community or voluntary groups may want to participate at a range of levels – from providing advice to co-designing the process and from undertaking some aspects of the engagement to delivering projects to meet some of the outcomes. Thinking through the questions and issues such as “What level of participation is it hoped will be achieved?”, “How to identify the stakeholders?” and “Are there any limitations?” will help in the planning and design of community engagement.

Focus to find measures for people to getting to know their communities. Research demographics for community engagement activities before you suggest any solutions. Inform how you reach various cultures in communities, as well as people with low-incomes, minority populations, people with disabilities, the elderly, people who speak other languages, and any other population traditionally underserved.

Don't forget to consider the importance of and to involve local community development networks and support organisations should be involved in identifying community stakeholders, their particular interests and needs and how best to engage with them.

One good example of engaging communities, is to attempt to bring City Hall to the Community. When the City Hall is difficult to access due to location and service hours, citizen engagement declines. Also, you could Bring the Town Hall Online – A online town hall is an event where cities engage citizens via social media outlets such as Twitter or Facebook for a scheduled time period. Users can ask questions, usually to a mayor, and get instant feedback regarding important issues. Endorsing online consultation in general may be the solution.

Furthermore, aim to prevent any form of displacement, and achieve full accessibility.. Incorporate policies, programs and incentives that maximize the ability of current residents to remain in their homes in the face of gentrification, and discourage displacement of viable businesses that serve community needs. Understand and respond to local context. Respect local community character, cultural diversity, and values while building upon local assets, and preserve and expand affordable housing options. Ensure that future projects are accessible and welcoming to people of all ages, incomes, abilities, or languages. So ensure inclusion, develop plans with local community participation and leadership in decision-making to reflect a diversity of voices, including targeted strategies to engage historically marginalized communities.

Advance economic opportunity, and complement or support healthy, safe and affordable housing for all family sizes and incomes in all neighbourhoods. Help increase quality living wage jobs for people in all neighbourhoods and enhance community-serving establishments.

Enhance community health through public amenities (schools, parks, open spaces, complete streets, health care and other services), access to affordable healthy food, improved air quality, and safe and inviting environments.

Frame the issues within relative contexts using qualitative and quantitative data. Depending on the context, consider strategies such as participating in pre-existing cultural and festival gatherings, providing information kiosks around the community, hanging posters at grocery stores, schools or faith-based organizations, submitting articles to local print media, developing inserts for utility bills, appearing on local radio or television stations, or creative placemaking.

And last but not least, think about why the community is being engaged (it may be required but it's also a good idea), where your decision may have the greatest impact, when participation will be most effective, and what methods you will use to reach out to the community.