



**Nelson Mandela
Metropolitan
University**

for tomorrow



Conversations for Improved Public Participation

27 July 2014

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!Unexpected End of Formula

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1. Introduction

Conversations for improved public participation was a workshop facilitated by the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, School of Natural Resource Management on the 4th of June 2014 as part of a doctorate study supported by the Sustainability Research Unit. The workshop was focused on public participation processes and facilitating social learning. *Conversations for improved public participation* is based on a social learning method which is becoming a popular approach to help society tackle the messy and wicked problems faced with today. The method is characterized by individuals and groups from a diversity of backgrounds and interests learning together through knowledge exchange, learning by doing and reflexivity and co-creating innovative solutions to problems that are difficult to solve. The method required that individuals interact and engage with others and become aware of and reflect on their own and other perspectives.

Public participation and stakeholder engagement in environmental management and decision making is a legislated requirement found in the National Environmental Management Act 107 of 1998, the National Environmental Protected Areas Act 57 of 2003, the National Water Act 36 of 1998 and the Municipal Systems Act 32 of 2000. A variety of means and methods are used in implementing public involvement in decision making but processes are often fraught with challenges and pitfalls. *Conversations for improved public participation* was an opportunity for dialogue around the challenges to public participation / stakeholder engagement with the aim of collaboratively brainstorming solutions for improvement. Participants from a diversity of interest groups and sectors who are participants in various local forums and committees in the Garden Route of the Western Cape of South Africa attended the workshop. Representatives from the local municipal offices, conservation authorities, the farming and forestry sector, general public, civic and environmental interest groups attended.

Participants arrived with a diversity of desired outcomes which included meeting others and hearing their opinions and views; learning, gaining more knowledge and understanding; wanting to find other ways of engaging; addressing the gap between people and authorities and improving public participation and ways of engagement. A desire for meaningful participation and the need for others to listen were also expressed.

The following report is a record of what emerged through the process and which was documented by participants themselves. It is a reflection of participant views and opinions from three conversations. Conversation 1 reflected on participant experiences of public participation / stakeholder engagement; Conversation 2 asked participants to suggest ways of mitigating the challenges faced in public participation and / stakeholder engagement. Conversation 3 was designed to consider a way forward by focusing in on commonly mentioned strategies and mitigations. Participants also had a final opportunity to highlight any specific key points or gaps in understanding.

2. **Conversation 1. Reflecting on the way things are now (experiences of public participation)**

In Conversation 1 participants were asked to reflect on their experiences of public participation as it is currently. Seventy two different issues with the way public participation is currently implemented were raised in the reflective conversation. These issues fall within 8 categories being communication (34 identified issues); logistics and planning (29 issues); relationships, conflict and trust issues (28 issues); skills, knowledge, understanding and information (23 issues); views, opinions or feelings toward public participation (23 views and opinions); stakeholder representation (15 issues) and power (12 issues).

The predominant **view, opinion or feeling towards public participation** was that it is a tick box exercise and is not genuine. This was emphasised by participants. Many felt the public participation itself can be a hindrance or inhibitor to progress and that the process has become politicized and is not democratic. Less prevalent views were that the system itself is flawed, that no benefits arise from processes and that it often lacks relevance or public interest. Feelings of frustration, futility and being burdened by bad decisions were expressed.

Issues with communication were the most common experiences expressed by participants. The most significant was a feeling of being ignored which is due to a lack of feedback / report back and follow through within the process. The feeling is that the authorities do not listen to what the stakeholders say because they have no intention of taking any notice. The important word is "Listening." A participant felt that there is nothing in the Law which compels an authority to listen to a shareholder or to take any notice what he or she says.

Participants felt that the media was not being utilized enough and that invitations to meetings and forums as well as topic related information needed to be publicised more. Some participants felt that issues were swept under the carpet and that the public are told what they want to hear rather than the truth. It was also felt that a lack of valid input into the processes was evident.

Logistical and planning issues were significant. The most prominent logistic and planning issue was time and timing. Participants felt that the public participation processes are very time consuming, and often inadequate time is given to running them. The timing of stakeholder involvement was also raised and the time at which meetings take place is often an inhibitor to involvement of stakeholders. The availability of transportation to attend meetings was also raised.

The second most significant logistic and planning issue was the language barrier inhibiting participation. Meetings often took place in languages that are not fully understood by the majority of the participants. Inadequate preparation and planning was also mentioned as an issue were documentation and information is often not sent out timeously. Less significant logistic and planning issues included that the one size fits all approach is not working and that processes need to be better documented (minutes, attendance registers, feedback reports). It was also felt that processes did not provide adequate opportunity for discussion. Concern was expressed that public participation is not adequately covered

(mandated) in the legislation and especially the National Water Act which does not fall under the National Environmental Management Act and allows officials to ignore the public participation mandate.

Participants felt that a **lack of knowledge and understanding** of processes, systems and topic was a significant issue in currently implemented public participation together with a lack of **unskilled and inexperienced facilitators and staff** mandated to undertake processes.

The gaps in economic status and education were considered a challenge to meaningful participation and the difference between the previously advantaged and the waiting to be advantaged in the area was demonstrated in Table 1 as well as the rich vs poor divide using the Gini Coefficient in Figure 2, both of which were discussed in conversations.

Table 1. Percentage of previously advantage and waiting to be advantaged in the area

	Previously advantaged	Waiting to be advantaged
Sedgefield	43%	57%
Knysna	18%	82%

The Gini coefficient (AKA the Gini index or Gini ratio) is a measure of inequality of income or wealth and represents the income distribution of a country. A Gini coefficient of zero indicates equality, where everyone has the same income. A Gini coefficient of one (or 100%) expresses inequality where one person has all the income. A value greater than one occurs if some persons have a negative income or wealth.



Figure 1. The Gini coefficient as explained by a participant

A lack of understanding of other cultures was raised as an inhibiting factor to better communication. Participants also felt that there was little sharing of information where stakeholders (participants and authorities) kept what they know close to their chest.

Participants mentioned uneven **power issues** on twelve occasions stating that often processes are hijacked by others with their own agenda where some wish to control the process. Participants felt that they had little part in decision making nor was their opportunity to talk to the decision makers in processes.

Several issues related to **stakeholder representation** were mentioned by participants. Participants felt that the diversity in representation which is often a goal or objective by which some are measured in terms of official performance areas was inappropriate. They felt that often parties are not interested or that the topics are not relevant to them and that they should rather focus on working with the affected and the interested rather than striving for the perfect demographic. Other issues related to representation include a lack of attendance by key stakeholders and a lack of consistency in attending individuals. Some felt that forums and processes just involved the usual suspects and some participants felt that often too many representatives are in attendance. Participants also felt that public participation was not inclusive and some key individuals are often not involved and others excluded or not allowed to talk. Lack of mandate held by some participants in processes was an issue.

Relationships, conflict and trust issues were commonly mentioned. These also relate to collaboration and relationship building where interactions are perceived as antagonistic and competitive. Participants felt there was a lack of transparency, corrupt individuals and distrust in information within processes and often differing perception of roles, responsibilities (who is responsible for what?) and outcomes is evident. Little collaboration or social cohesion was highlighted as an issue, were departments and groups work in silos and where there is little accountability. Participants drew attention to several prevailing attitudes inhibiting public participation. It was felt some stakeholders are rude and uncivil or often apathetic and that a “Not In My Back Yard” (NIMBY) attitude was found. It was felt that sometimes participants are in it for their own interests or agenda and not for the greater good of the community.

2.1 What would it be like if nothing changes?

When participants were asked to visualise what it would be like if nothing changes in how we implement public participation and stakeholder engagement the predominant feeling was that this would result in a chaotic and lawless environment with increased crime and corruption where nobody is held accountable. It was felt that it would result in a disempowered public who will withdraw from processes resulting in less participation. It would increase frustration, conflict, and distrust and the misuse of resources and the environment would occur. Participants also felt that more protest and damage to

property would take place. It would result in greed and money being the driver and a lack of confidence in the system. The comments related to a “business as usual” scenario and their frequency proportion is graphically represented in Figure 2.

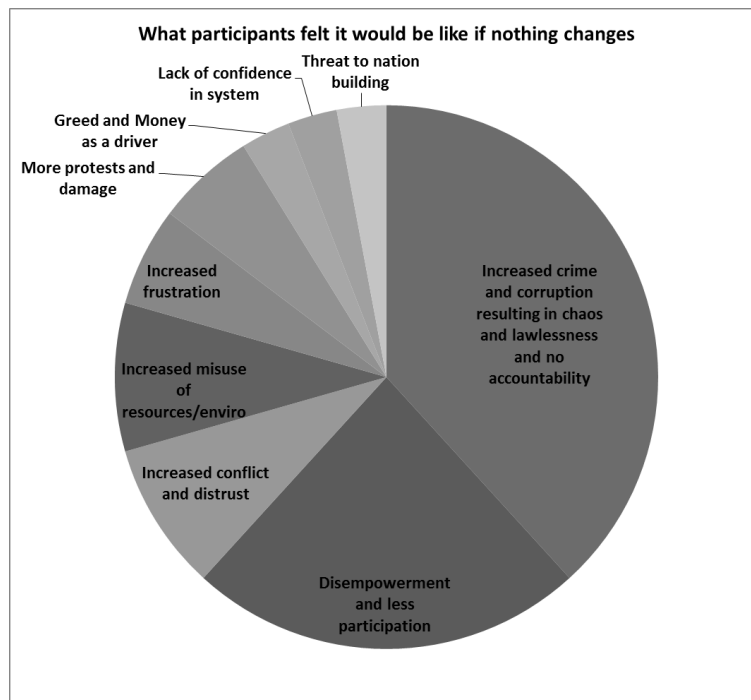


Figure 2. What participants felt it would be like if nothing changes

3. **Conversation 2. How can we do things differently (what needs to change?)**

A second round of conversations focused on how public participation / stakeholder engagement can be improved by asked how we can do it differently, highlighting what needs to be changed. The same categories that helped organise the experiences of public participation were used to organise the suggested mitigations and strategies. From the beginning of the conversation participants highlighted that the world is changing and the way in which the public participate in decision making also needs to. Participants expressed a desire to be a part of the change that is needed. During Conversation 2 Participants described what needs to change and how it can be done differently.

Communication issues can be mitigated by encouraging active listening and incorporating community input with proper feedback and greater sharing of information. It is vital that roles, responsibilities, objectives and expected outcomes are made explicit so as to ensure accountability. Communication strategies need improvement and it was suggested that multiple media (radio, newspapers, billboards, loud hailers) be used to advertise meetings and events and to provide topic related information.

Logistics, planning and process can be improved through better administration of and access to resources for public participation. Long term planning of processes and systems is required and it should be ensured that the law is followed. A suitable enabling environment and venue must be provided and times of meetings and events should be suitable for the majority of participants. Transport must be provided and meetings should take place in a language suited to the majority of stakeholders or interpreters should be present so that all participants understand. Information or at least summaries of information should be supplied in suitable languages reflective of participants. Participants felt sufficient notice and time needs to be given to processes.

It was suggested that improved use of technology was needed (producing and printing minutes on site of meetings) and that greater opportunity for participants to engage in dialogue was necessary. Participants felt that the focus should be on importance / priorities and what is right.

Participants considered a multi-pronged approach to stakeholder engagement and public participation for conservation authorities. A multi-pronged approach was described as multiple ways in which the conservation authorities can engage with the public and involves community interaction on specific issues (pollution, water, fire etc); working with existing community forums instead of creating new ones; establishing an ambassador program; having open days, capacity development programs to enable participation and using multiple mediums (newspapers, radio, billboards) to communicate with stakeholders. A representation of a multi-pronged approach was represented in graphic form in Figure 3.

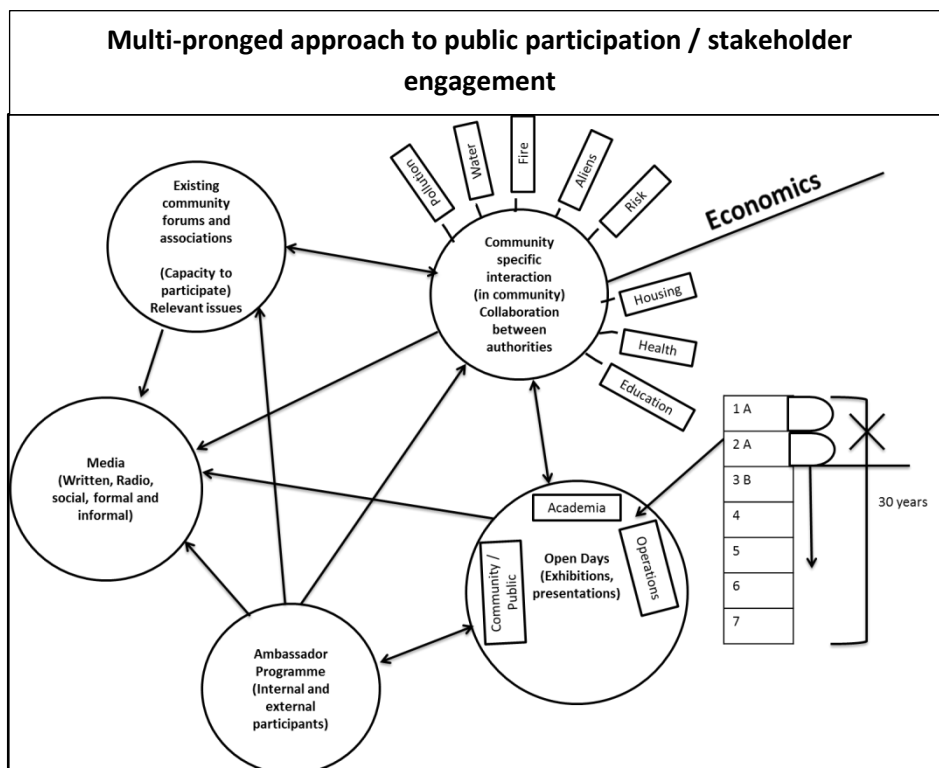


Figure 3. Conceptualization of a multi-pronged approach

A means to affect change in communities was illustrated by a participant and can be found in the Figure 4.

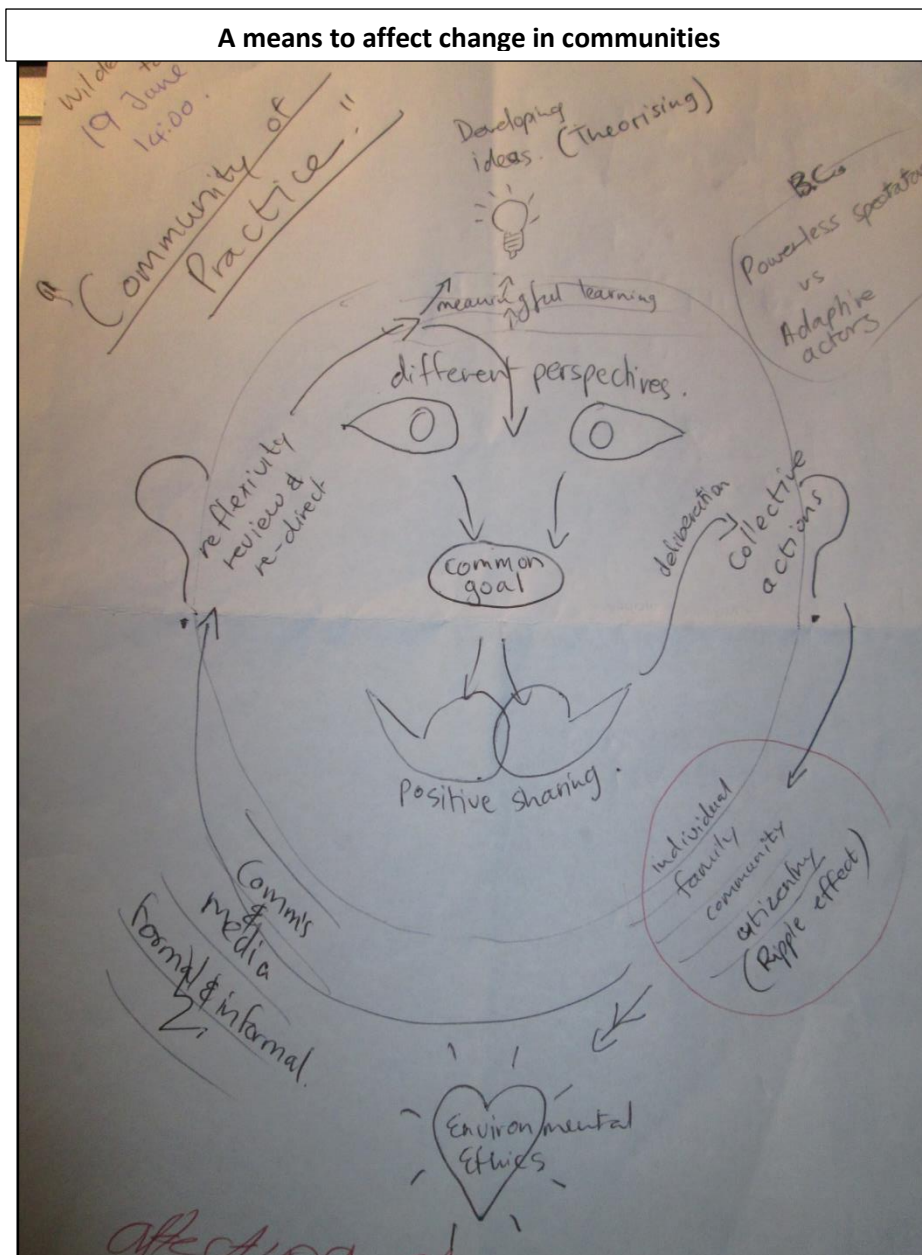


Figure 4. A diagrammatic illustration reflecting a means to affect change in communities

Participants felt the public participation / stakeholder engagement processes must have relevance to the public and incentives /disincentives could be used to motivate mandated officials. Participants expressed a need for systems of accountability where the roles and responsibilities of stakeholders were explained clearly. Furthermore a monitoring and evaluation system to measure success was recommended.

Participants felt that **power** dynamics must be managed and that the power of the vote and consensus could be moderating methods. A request for more participation in management activities and decision making by the public was made. The power differential perceived by participants is graphically demonstrated in Figure 5 and 6.

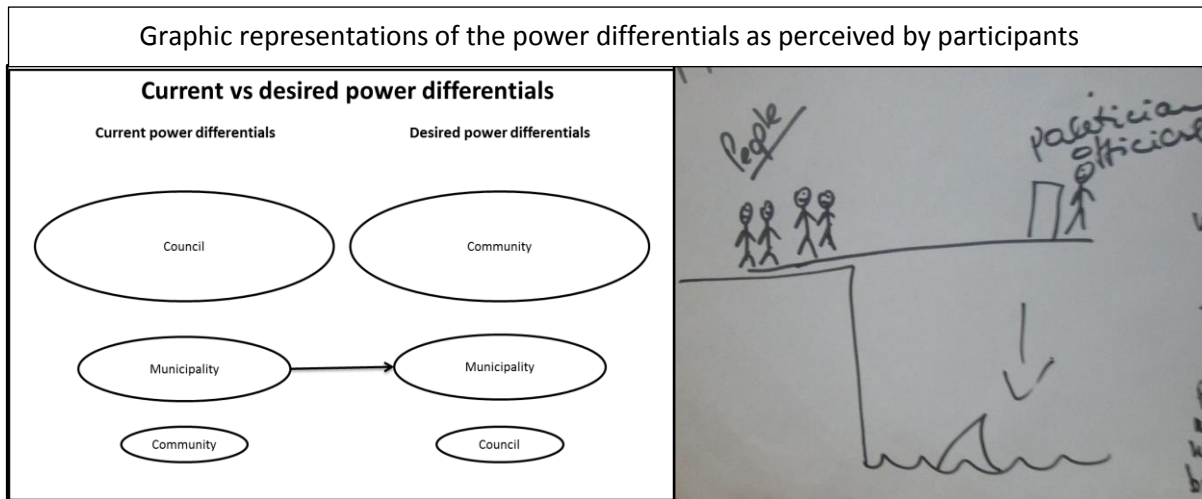


Figure 6. Participant perception of current vs desired power differentials in public participation / stakeholder engagement.

Figure 5. Representation of power by participants

A collaborative approach which is respectful of all views and opinions and does away with silos was recommended, as was cross pollination and trust building as ways of improving **relationships**, reducing **conflict** and building **trust**. Participants expressed the need for rooting out corruption and the need for accountability.

To address the lack of **skills, understanding, knowledge and information** experienced in processes greater awareness of constraints to public participation together with relevant topic related education efforts was suggested. Greater information sharing was highlighted as an important need as was employing and utilizing skilled and qualified facilitators and staff to implement processes. It was suggested that specialist groups and the experience found in the retired community should be utilized and could help to reduce skills shortages, lack of understanding, knowledge and information.

Broader **stakeholder** involvement and embracing diversity was called for but it was also felt that the performance measures of demographic diversity are inappropriate. It was felt that stakeholder representation should focus on ensuring that the affected and the interested are involved rather than choices made along racial lines. A call was made for continuity in participant attendance where the same individuals from the various constituencies commit to attend meetings regularly instead of different constituent members attending the meetings. Participants felt this would contribute to greater accountability. Participants suggested that a better understanding of the community dynamics was required and that formulating a list of stakeholder groups would be helpful. A summary of the experienced issues in relation to suggested ways of doing it differently are provided in Table 3.

3.1 What would it be like if things changed?

Participants were asked what it would be like if public participation / stakeholder engagement was implemented differently. Participants felt that improved participation and engagement would include having happier and empowered communities, informed authorities, better outcomes and productivity, improved relationships and better communication. Participants felt that improved public participation / stakeholder engagement would result in a blooming nation, less strikes, protests and damage to property and environment and would leave a legacy for the next generation. Furthermore it was felt that it would result in better relationships, greater ownership, and accountability as well as shared responsibility. A Wordle image has been produced to graphically represent what participants felt it would be like if public participation and stakeholder engagement was improved. A Wordle image or tag cloud is a visual representation of text data, typically used to reveal keyword metadata. Tags are usually single words, and the importance of each tag is shown with font size where the word size indicates how often a term was used in the selected text. For example the term “Better” was used more so than others (e.g. better participation, better outcomes) and its size is an indication of how often it was mentioned.



Figure 7. Wordle image representing outcomes of improved public participation / stakeholder engagement

Other participant drawings representing better communication and happiness are shown in Figures 8.

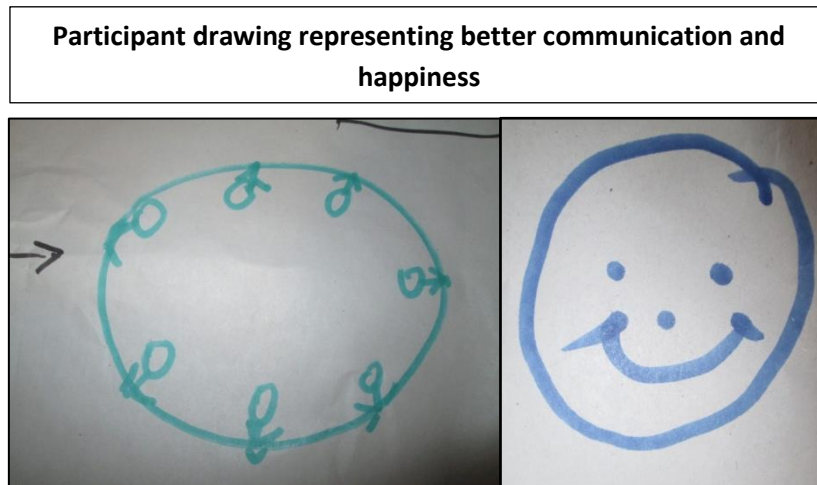


Figure 8. Participant drawings of better communication and happiness

4. Conversation 3. What next?

The final conversation was designed to consider the way forward by identifying the key strategies for participants to take back to their specific constituencies. Opportunity to raise strategies not highlighted was provided to fill in any gaps which may have occurred in bringing key issues to the fore. A participant presented a cost benefit graph to illustrate the implication of the choices to be made at the opening of the conversation.

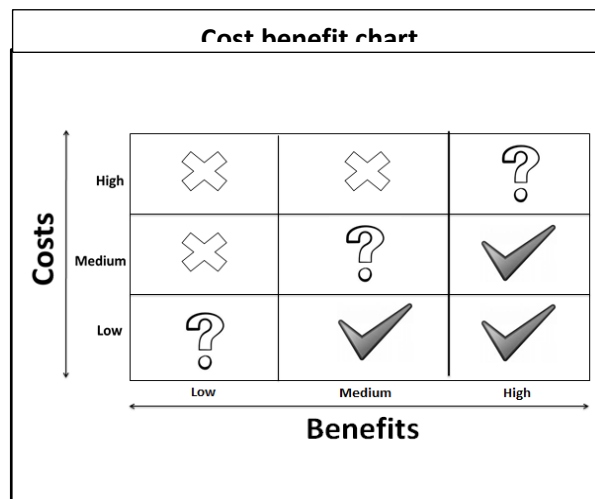


Figure 9. Representation of the cost and benefit chart.

During conversation 3 the need for a mind-set change and for participants to take a stance and appeal the existing processes was expressed. A review of policy was raised as a necessary activity to affect change. The logistic, planning and process issues related to providing an accessible venue; transport to the venue; times of the meetings; timely notification of events and meetings; timely dissemination of material prior to events and meetings; the need to address language issues and provide translators at events and meetings and information and summaries in popular languages; better administration and the need for minutes and scribes to capture proceedings; catering requirements for diabetics were also brought up. Communication was again raised and the use of a diversity of media including non-traditional method such as billboards and loud hailers was suggested.

Participants wanted clarification on what a multi-pronged approach meant describing and briefly discussing desirable characteristics. Several characteristics were mentioned and are graphically represented in Figure 10.

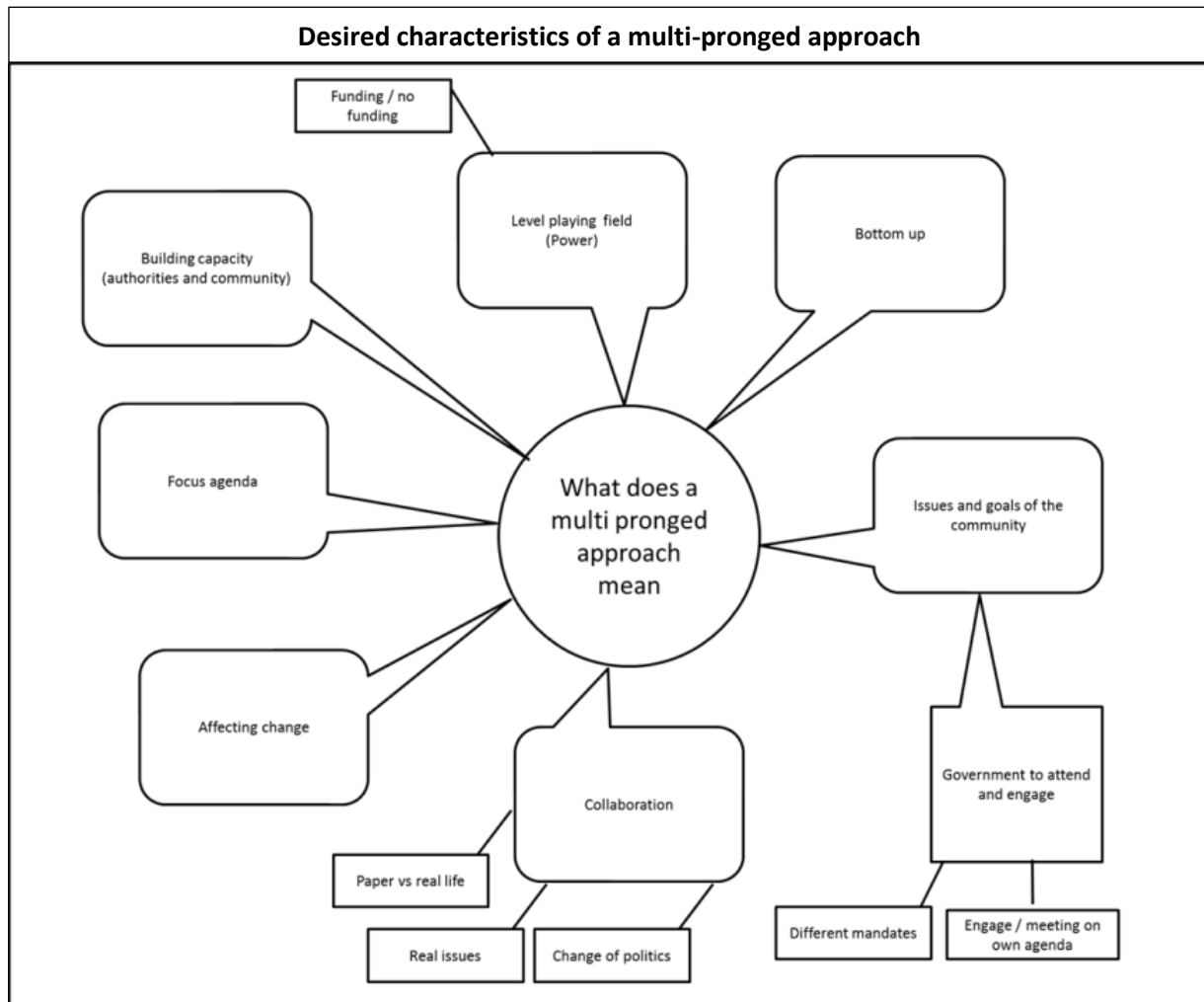


Figure 10. Characteristics of a multi-pronged approach to public participation / stakeholder engagement

The issue of diversity of participants in public participation/stakeholder engagement was discussed where it was felt that even though a process should embrace diversity this should not be considered a performance measure if done according to racial lines. Striving for diversity in affected and interested parties was stressed as a more appropriate focus for ensuring diversity of participation. Participants also felt that awareness of processes and topic as well as capacity development was needed to encourage a diversity of participation.

5. Final remarks made by participants

In concluding the workshop participants were given the last word where they expressed learning through the process and felt that through the learning change can take place. They found the discussions "eye opening" and that the day was productive. Many participants were surprised and encouraged to see that such a diverse group of individuals have the same ideas and concerns. Participants felt that the process was informative and that knowledge is power. It was felt that the method used in the workshop provided a safe space and freedom to engage and that it should be used or taken up by forums and processes beyond the workshop.

Participants felt that it was important to change their perspectives and that they are able to adapt and change the way public participation / stakeholder engagement is implemented. They stressed that the main resource is people and that co management starts with sharing of power.

6. Summary

From the facilitator's perspective and review of the notes, figures and drawings generated in the workshop a summary table reflecting the issues currently experienced in public participation, mitigating strategies and different ways of doing formulated by participants to address the issues is provided in Table 2.

Table 2. Issues identified by participants and ways in which public participation can be done

Conversation for improved public participation	
World Café Workshop	
Issue	Ways of doing it differently
<p>Communication issues: Feeling ignored, no feedback or report backs, issues swept under the carpet and only told what we want to hear. Little use of media for advertising events and providing information related to topics. Lack of valid input</p>	<p>Ways of doing it differently: Active listening of others and incorporating community input with proper feedback and greater sharing of information. Explaining of roles, objectives and expected outcomes and improving communication strategies using multiple media (radio, newspapers, billboards, loud hailers)</p>
<p>Logistics, planning and process issues: Legislation mandating public participation is not adequate, inadequate preparation and planning prior to meetings, time and timing of process and meetings, limited accessibility to venues, lack of transport, too many or too few meetings with little opportunity for discussion, no minutes or records of events and language barriers in meetings. The one size fits all approach doesn't work</p>	<p>Ways of doing it differently: Better administration and access to resources for public participation. Long term planning of processes and systems ensuring the law is followed. Suitable enabling environment and venue to be provided and times to be suitable for the majority, Transport to be provided and meetings to take place in a language suited to majority or interpreters to be present, sufficient notice and time given to the process, improved use of technology and providing opportunity to engage in dialogue. The focus should be on importance / priorities and what is right, multi-pronged approach with monitoring and evaluation systems to measure success, improved use of technology in processes. Process must have relevance, incentives / disincentives and accountability are required</p>
<p>Power issues: Processes are often hijacked and participants feel they are not part of the decision making nor get to talk to decision makers. Often power is unevenly distributed</p>	<p>Ways of doing it differently: Power dynamics need to be managed, use the power of vote and consensus, more participation in management</p>
<p>Relationships, conflict and trust issues: Interactions characterized by antagonism, competition and distrust, corrupt individuals, lack of transparency and accountability, little understanding of who is responsible and little collaboration and social cohesion where groups are working in silos, negative, apathetic and NIMBY attitudes are prevalent</p>	<p>Ways of doing it differently: Collaborative approach doing away with silos which encourages cross pollination and trust building, corruption to be rooted out and everyone's views and opinions respected, accountability and explanations of roles, responsibilities and outcomes</p>
<p>Skills, understanding, knowledge and information issues: A lack of knowledge, understanding to fully participate and a lack of information sharing, unskilled and inexperienced facilitators and mandated staff, misunderstanding due to cultural differences and gaps between rich/poor and educated/uneducated</p>	<p>Ways of doing it differently: Greater awareness raising of constraints and education efforts required. Finding and utilizing skilled and qualified facilitators and staff, utilizing specialist groups and experience found in the retired community</p>
<p>Stakeholder representation issues: Processes not always inclusive where some are not involved, lack of attendance and consistency in attendance, some not appropriately mandated with too much representatives or the usual suspects. Stakeholders not in it for the greater good of the community. Representation of demographically diverse groups an inappropriate measure of performance</p>	<p>Ways of doing it differently: Broader stakeholder involvement embracing diversity but focusing on the affected and the interested rather than on racial lines. Continuity in attendance, understanding and knowing the community dynamics is required. A call for the youth to be involved and the formulating of a list of stakeholder groups is needed</p>

Photo gallery

