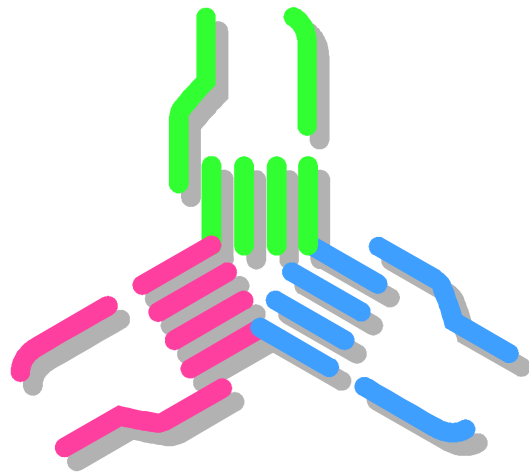




Community Participation



How People Power Brings
Sustainable Benefits to
Communities

J. Norman Reid

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Executive Summary

Active community participation is key to building an empowered community. Not only is participation a requirement for USDA's empowerment programs, but it is also critical to community success. Studies show that communities with high rates of participation apply for—and receive—more funding than communities with less participation. In addition, participating communities achieve greater citizen satisfaction with their community.

What does a participating community look like? While it varies from one place to another, participating communities share several characteristics. First, in participating communities, many people are involved in the community's activities. Business is not simply run by an elite leadership, but it is the work of everyone.

Second, participating communities are open to involvement by all groups, and responsibilities are divided up so that the special talents and interests of contributing organizations are engaged. Power and responsibility are decentralized. Participating communities have many centers of activity, and community action engages the natural enthusiasm and talents of citizens.

Third, participating communities conduct their business openly and publicize it widely. Citizens are well informed about the community's work and about their opportunities for personal involvement in meaningful roles.

Fourth, in participating communities, there is no such thing as a bad idea. All ideas are treated with respect and welcomed as a source of inspirations with potential value for the entire community. Participating communities encourage citizens to offer their best for the common good.

Fifth, participating communities make no distinctions among various groups and types of personalities who offer themselves to community involvement. All persons are actively welcomed, regardless of color, age, race, prior community involvement, level of education, occupation, personal reputation, handicap, religion, or any other factor. Furthermore, participating communities do not sit by passively, waiting for a diverse group of citizens to present themselves. They realize that past discrimination and other factors can stop people from stepping forward, and they actively reach out to all citizens to encourage their participation.

Finally, participating communities operate openly and with an open mind. They are not controlled by any single organization, group, or philosophy, and their leadership is used to facilitate discussion of a diversity of viewpoints, rather than to push its own agenda. Leaders are not ego-driven but focused on operating a high-quality, open decision-making process.

Communities seeking to empower themselves can build active citizen participation by welcoming it, creating valuable roles for each person to play, actively reaching out to build inclusive participation, and creating and supporting meaningful volunteer opportunities.

Of all the empowerment principles, active citizen participation is perhaps the most important. Not only does it lead to developing true democratic processes, but studies show that it also leads to higher rates of resource acquisition and use, better results, higher levels of volunteerism, and a brighter community spirit. In short, participation is the soul of an empowered community.

Introduction

Community participation is one of the key ingredients of an empowered community. Participation is the heart that pumps the community's life blood—its citizens—into the community's business. It is a principle so important that USDA has made active citizen involvement in all aspects of strategic plan development and implementation a condition for continued participation in its Empowerment Programs.

Community participation . . . is critical to community success.

But community participation is far more than a requirement. It is a condition for success. Studies have documented that communities that engage their citizens and partners deeply in the work of community development raise more resources, achieve more results, and develop in a more holistic and—ultimately—more beneficial way. Community participation, then, is critical to community success.

Participation in Practice

What *is* active community participation? How can you know when you have achieved it? What does it look like?

The truth is, there is no one *right* way to achieve deep community involvement—it will look different in every community. Yet, there are some common elements to sound participation that will be found in all communities. What are these elements?

Many People

The first and most obvious principle of participation is that many people are involved. The work of the community is not considered to be the special province of a knowledgeable few—perhaps the same elite leadership who have always run community affairs—but it is the business of everyone. Participating communities engage many people in their work.

Many Centered

Participating communities are open to involvement by many groups. They divide up responsibilities in a way that draws on the special talents and interests of contributing organizations by assigning responsibility for independent action to these groups. In short, under the overall umbrella of a representative community board, power and responsibility are decentralized in a participating community. The result

is a community that has many centers of activity and that is capable of reaching deeply into the natural enthusiasm and talents of its citizens.

Open and Advertised

The business of participating communities is open to all and widely-publicized. Citizens are informed—by a variety of means—about the community's work, and

In a participating community, power and responsibility are decentralized.

opportunities for citizens to find meaningful roles in contributing to that work. Secrecy—which only leads to suspicion, distrust, and ultimately to the death of community involvement—is strictly avoided.

Open to All Ideas

In participating communities, there is no such thing as a bad idea. All ideas are welcomed and treated with respect. This not only honors the person whose idea is put forward, but it also sets a welcoming tone for fresh ideas and inspirations that might otherwise be hidden due to fear of ridicule.


Participating communities establish ways of screening out the best ideas from the merely "interesting," but in a way that acknowledges the value of all ideas, no matter what their source. In doing so, they encourage all their citizens to bring forth their best for the common good.

How Clare County EC Does It

The key to success for Clare County Enterprise Community (Michigan) has been the democratic manner by which business is conducted. The Board of Directors views no idea as a bad one. Each idea brought to the group is treated with equal consideration. When requests for assistance come to the EC, they are reviewed very thoroughly to see which benchmark they might fall under. Because of the breadth of applications, there are few requests that cannot be easily associated with one of the benchmarks.

Inclusive and Diverse

In a participating community, no distinctions are drawn among various groups and types of personalities who offer themselves to community involvement. All persons are actively welcomed into useful roles, regardless of their color, age, race, prior community involvement, level of education, occupation, personal reputation, handicap, language, appearance, religion, or any other factor. Participating communities know and recognize that, truly, we are all made equal, that we have an equal right to share in the work and benefits of community enhancement, as well as in its costs. The entire community is poorer when we fail to do so.



Participating communities do not sit by passively, waiting for a diverse group of citizens to present themselves for involvement.

Further, participating communities do not sit by passively, waiting for a diverse group of citizens to present themselves for involvement. They realize that past discrimination, inexperience, and individual reluctance can hinder full community involvement, and they actively reach out to all citizens to invite active contributions to the community's business.

Open Mind, Open Process

As a consequence, participating communities operate so that it is clear to all that they are not controlled by any one organization, do not represent any one group of people, and are not limited to any one philosophy or way of doing business. Their leadership is used to facilitate discussion of a diversity of viewpoints, rather than to push its own agenda. Leaders are not ego-driven but focused on operating a high-quality, open decision-making process. In short, they are open—open in mind, and open in the way they carry out community activities.

Why Participation Matters

Community participation is not an idle principle. Communities that have chosen to follow it find that not only do they derive more satisfaction from the joy that comes from open community involvement, but they also achieve more results, more rapidly, and with greater benefit to the community as a whole. In short, participating communities succeed better than those that only pay lip service to this important principle.

Unpublished analysis of rural Round I EZ/EC communities conducted by researchers at Iowa State University shows unmistakable evidence that EZ/ECs with higher rates of citizen control and involvement in their community's strategic plan achieved far higher levels of leveraging of funds against their EZ/EC (SSBG)

Participating communities succeed better than those that only pay lip service to this important principle.

grants. Communities with higher rates of citizen participation were much more likely to have citizen control of their governing boards, more diverse board membership, greater adoption of the "empowerment" approach, and—as a result—higher levels of success in attracting the resources needed to implement their plans.

How Fayette EC Does It

The Fayette Enterprise Community in Pennsylvania made an incredible amount of progress in a short time on the family recreational facility in the town of Republic. Although the anticipated cost for the facility was \$300,000, they quickly received in excess of \$335,000 in public and private funding. But the most remarkable aspect has been the continued support of the community with personal monetary donations totaling over \$47,000, and the numerous hours of volunteer manpower to complete excavation work for the facility. The anticipated opening of the facility is the fall of 2000.

Why should this be the case? Why shouldn't communities with boards controlled by those traditionally in charge, with less diversity, and who view the Empowerment Program as "a grant" rather than a new way of doing business do just as well? The answer lies in the spirit that exists when a true "community" is created.

A number of contemporary observers have pointed to the power of community in people's lives. Among them are M. Scott Peck, author of *The Road Less Traveled*, and Sam Keen, best-selling author on personal development and spirituality. Both authors find that in the modern world, it is through community with other people that individuals find their highest personal growth. A true community is not the same as a "group," which can be any collection of people, no matter how loose.

How Kentucky Highlands EZ Does It

Jackson County, part of the Kentucky Highlands Empowerment Zone, reports its best example of citizen participation is its Vision 2000 Project Group. The group meets monthly, and subgroups often meet three times per month. The monthly meeting has never had under 30 attendees, and usually attracts 40-45. There are always new faces at every meeting, so they estimate 100 or more individuals representing more than 20 different agencies and organizations are involved altogether. The momentum of this group has not worn off, but seems to get stronger and stronger.

The differences between this group and other EZ groups seem to determine why the Vision 2000 Project Group is so successful:

- From the first planning meeting, every community agency and organization in the county was invited. From the get-go, the group got their input—not after it had already decided what to do.
- They used the storyboarding technique, which allows participants to say anything as long as it's not negative, and it is placed on newsprint. No matter how good or bad the idea is, no one is allowed to make judgments or comments about the newsprint at that meeting. After the meeting, notes are taken from the storyboard and then the process of elimination begins.
- Meetings are advertised in the paper, but they also send colorful, energized reminders with uplifting or encouraging quotes out to everybody.
- At every meeting, each person is asked to introduce themselves and their organization.
- After introductions, the vision and mission statement is always read to remind participants of why they are there.
- An icebreaker is used at each meeting. It is always the same one. A member of the group volunteers to make five statements to the group about herself or himself. Four are true statements and one is false. The group works together to figure out which are truths and which is false. It is an excellent way to learn more about each other, and helps the group to see each other as individuals.
- They always use the same facilitator whenever possible to create continuity; people always know who they are going to "get."
- They serve food. Sometimes it is potluck; sometimes a wonderful cook in the group prepares home-cooked meals, and they collect money to reimburse costs. Sometimes, one of the organizations takes responsibility for the food. Spending half an hour eating and conversing is time well spent, and something to which people look forward.
- Each person realizes their importance to the group. They feel responsible to it. They feel like they are needed—and they are.

Community involves deep acceptance of one another, complete inclusiveness, and the self-awareness to have a realistic understanding of the circumstances in which the community finds itself. By offering each member the safety of knowing that they are accepted for who they are, such communities bring forth the best each

In community, instead of being ignored, denied, hidden, or changed, human differences are celebrated as gifts.

M. Scott Peck, *The Different Drum*

person has to offer, because they know their gifts of time, talent and ideas will be accepted with respect. In return, community members are motivated to give what they have to enable the whole community to prosper.

In short, when they invite **all** members of the area into an open, welcoming community of action—as many participating in the Empowerment Program have done—they are establishing a safe environment in which all can not only benefit, individually and collectively, but also give. It is because they are willing to do so that these “participating communities” have progressed so much more quickly than others.

How Can You Build Participation

Welcome it

The most important action you can take to encourage citizen participation is to welcome it. People know when they are welcome, and when they are not. Where they are not truly welcome, few people will stay for long.

Welcoming participation means more than giving new participants a friendly smile. It requires opening the process to newcomers and inviting their active participation in the business at hand. Some actions that can help are:

- Be glad for the opportunity for new contributions, despite any resentment that they were not present to help with already completed jobs.
- Explain where things stand, so participants can fit into the process easily.
- Offer a variety of job opportunities, so newcomers can find roles that fit their talents and interests.
- Take newcomers' ideas seriously, even when they represent viewpoints that

- have previously been considered and rejected. Be patient.
- Don't leave them out by making decisions among the "old-timers."

Create Real Roles

Nobody wants to stand on the sideline; each of us wants to play a position in the game. This is as true for newcomers as for those who have been participating for some time. In every community, there is more than enough work to go around. Assign new participants something that gives them a sense of meaningful involvement, and help them understand how their contribution—no matter how small—advances the overall effort. Hold them accountable for their results; this is an excellent way to help them see their contribution to the strategic plan, and it also assures their work has focus and value. At first, newcomers' duties may not carry much responsibility, while they are learning the ropes and other team members get to know their interests and capabilities. As time goes along, expand their roles to take full benefit from their willingness to contribute.

How the Empowerment Alliance of Southwest Florida Does It

The Empowerment Alliance of Southwest Florida, a Round II Enterprise Community, has discovered Select 10, a technique to expand community participation. Select 10 is a technique for Community Decision Making taken from a program entitled: *Health Futures: A Development Kit for Rural Hospitals*, developed by Paul McGinnis for the Mountain State Health Corporation. Select 10 has been used extensively by community health organizations throughout the nation.

The Select 10 technique asks a board member or community resident to select 10 individuals from the community. From this group of 10, the person conducts a "focus group" to learn more about the specific needs of the community as the focus group members see them. In addition to getting valuable input, however, this technique has other benefits:

- Personalizing contact with community members through face-to-face conversations
- Increasing involvement
- Providing reluctant citizens a safe way to explore participation
- Recruiting new members to the board or committees
- Involving community members in specific community activities
- Letting community members make decisions that affect them
- Ensuring buy-in to board actions

How the Breathitt County Action Team Champion Community Does It

Mark Williams, of the Breathitt County Action Team Champion Community in Kentucky, reports his experience in building participation:

“I moved into a new town to start a community-based sustainable economic development program. At first I had the names of 3-4 people who might be interested. I met with these people personally. I got a name from each of these individuals and again met with the others personally. During these initial meetings, I introduced myself, the process and asked if they would come to a few of these meetings. In total I may have met personally with 20-25 individuals. I also conducted a fairly large media campaign prior to the first public meeting—radio, newspaper and television. It was interesting to note that of the 25-30 people who attended the first meeting, 95 percent of them were people which whom I had shaken hands with. Best practice—shaking hands.

“I also contact participants as much as possible between meetings to ask advice or provide updates. I think this builds some sense of ownership and keeps people coming. Keeping people interested, though, is my biggest challenge.”

It may feel threatening for old-timers to give up responsibilities to someone new, but fresh ideas are the lifeblood of a vital community, and additional hands can help renew the strength of those who have carried the load in the past. Focus attention on the community rather than the individual personality so it does not become a barrier.

Reach Out

Because of past discrimination, or just the belief that community development is someone else's job, citizens may be reluctant to step forward. This is especially true for members of minority ethnic or educational groups historically left out of community affairs, and for groups that have newly arrived. To achieve the broad-based participation that is essential to building a true community, outreach is needed.

Outreach can take many forms: advertising community activities in the media, using newsletters, and making presentations at organizational meetings are some of the ways. But the most effective techniques involve direct, personal contact that is offered in a welcoming spirit (see sidebars for examples).

Offer Volunteer Opportunities

Volunteers are the lifeblood of rural community action. In an environment where paid officials are few and the resources to hire help are scanty, little happens without the leadership and labor of unpaid citizens.

The same principles apply to attracting volunteers as to other forms of participation. Be sure that the community's decision-making processes are open to new and different participants and ideas. Welcome diversity, and honor it. Publicize opportunities through newsletters, presentations to community organizations, and Web sites. Sometimes it helps to offer specific tasks to recent volunteers until they are comfortable with the strategic objectives and operating methods of the community.

In addition, be sure to treat volunteers right. Help them understand the importance of their contributions. Make certain that their work is clearly-defined, well-organized, and well-integrated into the overall community effort. And be sure to recognize and celebrate their contributions to community work, to keep them coming back.

Make Yourself Ready

Turning toward an open, participative community process is not an easy thing to do. It requires turning your back on ways of working that may be familiar and comfortable. It means inviting new and challenging ideas into the forum for discussion. It means working closely with unfamiliar people, with whom you may feel you have little in common, or who make you uncomfortable. It means accepting the fact that the outcomes you anticipate may not be the ones that eventually occur. It means tolerating a more difficult decision-making process until new groups are fully accepted and new working methods are established. For some leaders, it also means giving up an ego commitment to a cherished personal role, in favor of others whose right to share leadership must be acknowledged.

As your community makes this transition—and as individuals change their

How Josephine County EC Does It

The Josephine County Enterprise Community in Oregon began publication and free distribution to every family in Census Tract #3601 of a monthly community newsletter, *The Big News*. This "voice of the community" is read avidly and includes news about community activities including the school, the Community Response Team, the Teen Center, the Oregon Parent Center and other agencies and organizations. The two volunteer editors who have published this 12 to 16-page newsletter for the past four years retired this fall, passing the baton to a team of volunteers including 5 middle school and high school youth. The newsletter team prides itself for always making sure that the newsletter is in people's homes the first of each month.

How Fayette-Haywood EC Did It

The Fayette-Haywood Enterprise Community in Tennessee encountered an obstacle that was not initially anticipated when the strategic plan was developed—a lack of involvement and a certain degree of apathy within the community. At times, this meant there was a gap between project needs and the human resources available to meet them. Though they are an intangible force, the EC learned that public input and participation are indeed a powerful force that can significantly impact activities within the community. As a result, community leaders focused on maintaining direction despite dwindling participation.

One example of this need to maintain direction became manifest while examining the feasibility of a Community Housing Development Organization for Fayette County. Initially, the efforts were plagued by negative preconceptions about its purpose and role, and it began to succumb to indifference evident in poor attendance at subcommittee meetings.

The lack of public input and participation brought to light the need to improve public awareness and cultivate leadership in the community. Among the steps taken by the EC to address lack of involvement were these:

- Undertaking leadership development
- Being inclusive instead of exclusive
- Setting a positive tone for discussion by example
- Including the opposition in all discussions
- Remaining persistent, but with gracious dignity
- Maintaining active involvement even when obstacles surfaced
- Increasing the level of public relations and outreach

Specific practices the EC found helpful were:

- Establishing a policy of inclusiveness
- Holding open meetings
- Making speeches to community groups
- Obtaining public input
- Making public announcements
- Holding face-to-face meetings
- Conducting progress surveys
- Developing new partners

own perspectives about community-wide participation—it is helpful to keep the big picture in perspective. The reason for community involvement is not personal gain, notoriety, or power. It is to build a true community in the place you live and work. And, it is to make that community a better place for all who be-

long to it. When viewed this way, it is easier to see the importance of hearing all voices, of using all hands, of sharing the pain, of celebrating the gain. When you can do this in your community, you and your fellow participants can feel the deep sense of joy that comes from knowing you are a valuable part of something beautiful that is larger than all of you—a living community.

Resources

Keen, Sam. *Hymns to an Unknown God: Awakening the Spirit in Everyday Life*. New York: Bantam Books, 1994, pp. 221-45.

Peck, M. Scott. *The Different Drum: Community Making and Peace*. New York: Touchstone Books, 1998, esp. pp. 59-76.