

Nuevo South Communication Brief
Understanding Community Engagement
Bach Pham, ECU Graduate Student
March 21, 2011

Community-based participatory research - also known as community engagement - places power in the hands of the people by giving them the techniques and tools necessary to carry out projects for the community. The aim of community engagement seeks to not only provide aid in communities, but also teach its members the necessary means to carry out sustainable projects and research methods for success. In this brief, we will take a look at how community engagement works and discuss its merits for community building.

Though there are a variety of ways to approach community engagement, there are generally five steps that make up the process. The first steps bridge two diverse communities together, generally one in need with one that has the means for aid whether it be academic, governmental, or other, uniting both groups towards a common cause. The final steps put the responsibility in the hands of the community, making the other side acting as a partner or adviser of sorts, depending on the projects created. In this section, we'll be outlining the steps and taking a look at how community engagement works and how it differs from other aid-based work.

Step 1: Outreach and Organization

Communication is everything in engagement, and the first step of the whole process. Outreach not only includes introductions, but also the opportunity to seek out representatives within the community willing to participate and become advocates - people who can help the research team communicate with the community and also provide a voice for community itself. Advocates bring in the concerns and issues they'd like to address to the researchers and create a foundation for the project. Advocates chosen from the community are taught basic research and design tools to carry out the following steps of the process.

Step 2: Research and Design

Advocates found during the outreach process became instrumental here in not only making connections, but also explaining problems and issues unapparent to the researcher's eye. Advocates play a major role here in fact, taking charge of the research design and providing ideas for how to go about conducting any research in the community. The researchers generally play more of a supporting role in the end, helping shape the plans and tie loose ends, sometimes providing research examples to give advocates an idea of how and where projects can go. Once a direction is chosen for research, the team is sent out to work, gathering interviews and data to help build a picture of the problems in the community.

Step 3: Analysis and Preparation

Once the data has been collected, it is time for analysis. A big part of this process is the education provided to advocates on how to interpret the data found. A major goal of community engagement is to help members of the community gain the research experience and confidence to go out and do more future projects. Advocates are taught how to not only analyze data, but also present their findings to the public.

Step 4: Action

Once research and analysis has been done and at least a few projects have been devised, advocates put their plans into action. Advocates take the knowledge gained from their research and take on some of

the ideas generated from their analysis. Advocates are encouraged to take on any project as long as it is manageable and has the potential of creating a positive effect on the community. Projects are designed with the goal of creating closer ties in the community while encouraging more supportive activity towards a common goal, examples being improving neighborhood conditions, battling illness, cutting violence, or other similar kinds of problems that can pose a problem within communities.

Step 5: Sustainability

At some point in the project, an eventual check-up needs to be made to see how things have developed and whether anything needs to be changed or improved. Several things can happen here, adjustments may be made and possibly new projects proposed. The ultimate goal of community engagement is to provide advocates the essential tools to create and develop projects on their own, encouraging long term development within the community itself rather than by outsiders. Community engagement is at its best when advocates and members of the community are able to stand on their own and maintain consistent community-building projects while also passing on their knowledge to the others for further development.

Community Engagement in Action: Participation in *Yes We Can!*

Yes We Can!, funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, was an initiative in Battle Creek, Michigan to help reduce economic and educational problems plaguing the community. Some research was done on the project to see how participants felt about working with locals and researchers on community engagement projects like *Yes We Can!*. It was found that when the locals came together and made closer connections to one another, they were likely to become more active participants. Even when projects do not succeed with flying colors, community engagement still unites members of the community and allows for more future collaboration and discussion. The study found that it was clear that when no one was interested in taking part only a few stepped up and became active, but as more took part in the program, people were more inclined to take part and collaborate – especially when potential projects suggested were well-prepared and manageable for the members of the community.

Another key finding in the study noted that it was essential to act and react to each project and development independently. Although we outlined the general process of community engagement earlier, it is important to take note that each project is likely to have its own set of problems that needs its own set of answers. Even though there is a procedure that most community engagement projects stick by, some flexibility should always be there to help ease the process. Though we hope that community engagement can provide a quick answer to all our problems, the reality is that it most likely will not. It is something that will take time and patience from both the professional and local side, and requires dedication. Unlike other types of aid programs or projects, however, it gives communities in need a chance to work together, grow, and make stronger bonds that can create a positive effect in both the short and long term. It also bridges two groups of people that normally would not have the opportunity to work with one another, opening new doors for those in need.