

U.S ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION AGENCY
**PUBLIC PARTICIPATION VIDEO
TRAINING PROGRAM**

PARTICIPANT WORKBOOK

MODULE 1.
**INTRODUCTION TO MEANINGFUL PUBLIC
PARTICIPATION**



**PUBLIC
PARTICIPATION**

GUIDE

Engage the public. Preserve the planet.

Introduction

The greatest compliment that was ever paid me was when one asked me what I thought, and attended to my answer.

— Henry David Thoreau

When a project or decision can have significant impact on a group of people (community), it is important to consider the role that the public may play in making decisions and implementing actions; giving special consideration and attention to vulnerable populations and marginalized communities. However, before we make any promises to our community, it is important to give careful consideration to the specific nature of our project and the opportunities and implications of directly engaging the public.

Sections in Module 1:

- 1.1: What is Public Participation?
- 1.2: What are The Benefits of Public Participation?
- 1.3: What Does Good Public Participation Look Like?
- 1.4: **What Are The Necessary Conditions For Successful Public Participation?**



GROUP DISCUSSION

Our Current Public Participation Activities

How are we working with the public now?

Are we ensuring inclusion of all peoples, particularly vulnerable communities?

Does our interaction with the public have any impact on our decisions and actions? If so, how? If not, why not?

What are the challenges we face in understanding the issues and concerns of the public?

Do we believe the public could be more involved in making decisions about the future of issues in their communities?

SECTION 1.1: What is Public Participation?

The USEPA defines public participation as:

Any process that directly engages the public in taking an action or making a decision and gives full consideration to public input in making that decision.

The USEPA believes fair treatment and meaningful involvement of all people, regardless of race, color, national origin, sexual orientation, or income, is essential with respect to the development, implementation, and decisions made through the public participation process.

PUBLIC PARTICIPATION ≠ PUBLIC RELATIONS

Fundamentally, public participation is different than public relations and public information programs.

Public relations/public information:

- The goal is to provide information to the public or to explain why a decision was made.

Public Participation

- The goal is to obtain public input to help make decisions.
- Public participation must include the opportunity for the public to influence the decision or outcome of a project.
- Public participation must also be designed for public input to actually matter.

Sometimes, public relations is the right approach:

- For example, in public awareness campaigns, there is often no room for the public to affect the decision.
- And in social marketing activities, our goal is to change public behavior, and again, we are generally not inviting public input.

However, when the project outcomes are very important to the future of a community, those people are going to want to have some input. That is when we need to explore real opportunities for public input to influence the decision.

*The more important the issues,
and the more significant the potential impacts,
the more the community will want to be involved.*



GROUP DISCUSSION

Definition of Public Participation

Review the definition of public participation and the differences between public participation and public relations.

What is important about this definition to you and how might public participation apply in your work?

SECTION 1.2:

What Are The Benefits of Public Participation?

Public participation is not simply a nice or necessary thing to do:

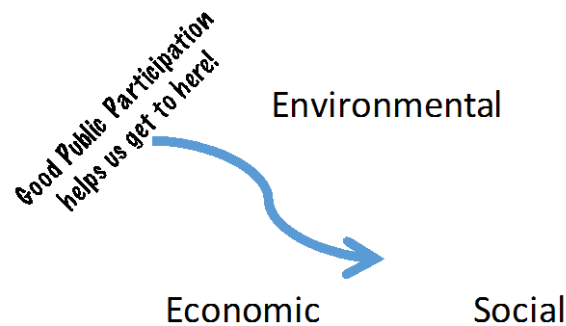
1. it results in better decisions
2. it can help resolve conflict
3. it helps communities develop long-term capacity for solving problems
4. it conserves long-term resources

Good public participation results in good decisions.

1) *Good public participation provides the foundation for making better decisions*

- **Decision-makers have more complete information** – in the form of additional facts, values, and perspectives obtained through public input.
- **Decisions are more implementable and sustainable** because the decision considers the needs and interests of all stakeholders, including those of vulnerable communities, and stakeholders better understand and are more invested in the outcomes.
- **Decisions are perceived as more legitimate** and are less subject to challenge.
- **Decision-makers become better communicators**, because they fully understand stakeholder interests and are able to explain decisions and decision rationale in terms stakeholders understand and in ways that relate to stakeholders values and concerns.

Public Participation Leads to Sustainable Decisions



The UN model of sustainability notes that the best decisions are made when the input from different sectors of society—environment, social, and economic—are all considered and are in balance. Decisions that dramatically favor any one area of society over the others cannot be sustained over time. Good public participation seeks out and considers this input equally and helps to create more sustainable decisions.

Good public participation prevents conflict.

2) *Good public participation results in less controversy and fewer conflicts*

- **Communities better understand decisions** leading to greater support and this support makes decisions both more implementable and sustainable.
- **Communities take more responsibility for outcomes**, once stakeholders are invited into the decision process, it becomes more difficult for them to merely stand to the side and simply say “no”.
- **Shared decisions result in ownership by communities**, and are decisions that communities want to see succeed. Thus, communities help to care for and sustain these decisions.

- **Community understanding and ownership prevents protests and anger** borne of hard feelings that can delay or derail decisions at the last minute.

Good public participation builds capacity.

3) Good public participation develops community capacity to solve problems

- **Stakeholders learn better practices**, good public participation processes help to teach stakeholders meaningful and collaborative ways to approach each other, manage difficult decisions, and resolve disputes.
- **Stakeholders learn to appreciate each others' positions** by first learning about each others' values and interests.
- **Stakeholders understand all sides of an issue** as participants in good decision-making, they learn to weigh the pros and cons and make more thoughtful decisions.
- **Stakeholders learn skills and expectations** for future interactions.

Good public participation saves time and money.

4) Good public participation conserves long-term resources.

Time and money spent up-front to conduct a good process pays off later on:

- **Effectiveness of decisions**, the investment in community knowledge results in decisions that are more durable.
- **Implementability of decisions**, decisions that are not challenged or overturned are more cost-effective.
- **Community Ownership**, communities that are involved in decision-making take ownership of the decisions and are invested in their long-term success.
- **Community Stewardship**, decisions that engage the community in their implementation and maintenance are more likely to succeed and require less of our time and money to manage.



GROUP DISCUSSION

Public Participation vs. Public Relations

Where have we experienced real participation vs. just public relations? What difference does it make in how the public feels about the decisions being made?

Do you think the possible benefits of public participation could apply to projects in your country? Why or why not?

What types of projects and communities could benefit from better participation? In what kinds of circumstances should the public voice be heard?

SECTION 1.3:

What Does Good Public Participation Look Like?

At the heart of all public participation is a good conversation.

Working with the public can take on many forms and does not always have to look the same.

- At its simplest, public participation looks like talking with your neighbors and asking them about their values, interests, and concerns.
- Public participation then asks that we thoughtfully consider that information as important knowledge as you make important decisions in your community.

Public participation is a two-way conversation.

We do not simply listen to public complaints and demands, but explore opportunities to engage meaningfully with communities, including communities that might be disproportionately burdened by the project, on approaches and strategies to solve complex challenges.

Six Characteristics of Good Public Participation

Consider the following characteristics when planning to use public participation:

Listen.

1. Public participation requires that we listen to the public.

- Agencies should not be concerned that seeking public input means having to do “what the public wants.”
- Instead, it is about understanding public issues and concerns and using this knowledge to help improve decisions.

Create a process.

2. Public participation is a process, not a single event.

- Good participation consists of a series of activities and actions over the full lifespan of a project by a sponsoring agency.
- Activities are conducted to both inform the public and obtain input from them.
- Like you, the public needs to start at the beginning and learn over time if they are to arrive at a thoughtful conclusion.

Design to the actual conditions.

3. Not all public participation projects are the same.

- Every project is different with different issues, stakeholders, and potential impacts.
- The needs of individual projects can even change from one stage to another.
- It is important to clearly articulate the project conditions so that each project is designed to meet its specific needs.

Engage all perspectives.

4. Public participation seeks to understand the full community.

- If done well, public input will be gathered from a wide spectrum of stakeholder interests and result in diverse input from all perspectives of the community, not just those who are loudest or most powerful.

Focus on what matters.

5. Public participation focuses on areas where public input will really matter.

- Meaningful public participation seeks to obtain input at the specific points and on the specific issues where the public has the real potential to help shape the decision or action.
- Asking for input on issues that cannot change only increases everyone's frustration and distrust.

Ask the right questions.

6. Public participation asks the questions that can make a difference.

- It is rarely appropriate or useful to simply ask the public "what do you want." Such broad questions will only raise expectations and likely direct input to areas where no influence is actually possible.
- Sometimes, the opportunity for influence is quite small, and sometimes the public can have a great deal of influence.
- The amount of this potential influence is the main consideration in designing a successful public participation program.

As we proceed through this video program, we will explore each of these concepts in more detail, understanding how to evaluate, plan, and implement effective participation programs.



GROUP DISCUSSION

Six Characteristics of Good Public Participation

Consider the six characteristics of good public participation discussed in these sections and answer the following:

How is this approach to public participation similar or differ from what you are doing now?

What types of activities contribute to having constructive conversations with your communities, how could we improve the use of these conversations?

SECTION 1.4:

What Are The Necessary Conditions For Successful Public Participation?

*To effectively engage our communities,
we must first prepare ourselves.*

As we prepare for public participation, we want to challenge ourselves with two fundamental questions:

- Are we doing public participation for the right reasons?
- Is our staff prepared?

Assess your capacity to engage.

Start by assessing your capacity to conduct successful public participation

In order to establish and maintain effective public participation, sponsoring agencies and decision makers should give careful consideration to how they are supporting the process.

Some important elements to successful public participation can include the following:

- **Sufficient resources to conduct the process**
Determine the level of funding and staff to support all aspects of the process, including a situation assessment, outreach activities, and obtaining and incorporating public input.
- **Participative capacity among staff and participants**
Consider existing capacity and potential for training in communication, outreach, and collaborative problem-solving skills.
- **A climate of integrity**
Trust and credibility of government are essential for public participation. Public participation will not flourish where government agencies or decision-makers are corrupt or disingenuous about considering public input.
- **A belief in the value of public input**
To what degree do we believe that public input will result in better decision-making and that public participation results in better governance.
- **Capacity to engage**
Ensuring that agencies know how to design and implement public participation processes, and that agencies and the public alike have the communication skills to participate effectively in the process.

- **Complete transparency**
The timely sharing of easily understandable and accessible information to educate the public about the issues and options.

The Importance of Transparency

Transparency represents the willingness of agencies to fully share the information, criteria, and deliberations of decision-making with the public. Without transparency, public input is not based on the same considerations that decision-makers are actually using to make its decisions. As a result, the public is unlikely to understand why decisions are made or how those decisions will impact them. Much public outrage is a result of not being provided complete and timely information.

Nobody's Perfect, Just Be Honest as to Where You are Now

Although the conditions and responsibilities for public participation are significant, you should not feel daunted.

Rather, we need to work with what we have, and try to improve over time.

Don't try to do everything at once, and don't try to involve the public in everything. Learning to focus your time and energy as well as the community's participation can be the most important factor in achieving success. Consider the following:

***Before you begin,
make sure you understand what is possible***

Clarify your boundaries.

- There are always restrictions on what you can do and where the public can be involved—legal, regulatory, financial, logistical, etc.
- Spend some time clearly articulating these boundaries and communicating them widely.
- Be aware of real constraints versus those that you are applying arbitrarily. Your communities will quickly know the difference and will not be understanding if they feel they are being manipulated or lied to.
- However, the public is often quite understanding of real restrictions if they are clearly and honestly articulated up front.
- Be careful to avoid suggesting false constraints, which can quickly lose public trust.

***If you want to find out what matters to the community,
just ask them***

Focus on what matters.

- Create a focus on what is most important to the community by asking them. Don't waste time engaging them on something they don't care about.
- Look for the areas where public input will most help you and that are most important to your communities.
- Make the focus of public participation the areas where public input will matter most and can actually help to shape the decision.
- In some cases, things that are critically important to the community may not be evident to them. Help them to understand why something is important and how it may impact the community.

Your entire process should support your focus

Ask the public questions related to the clear focus.

- Once you identify where public input is most important, organize your activities to obtain this input in the most effective way possible.
- We want to create the information and craft questions that help foster meaningful interaction on these issues.
- Never ask for input on issues where that input will not be used.

Don't make promises you can't deliver

Be realistic about your resources.

- Before you make any promises to the community, make sure the resources exist to follow through. Don't over promise.
- Focus your time and money on those things that you identify as most important.

Without complete and honest information, the public cannot provide thoughtful and useful input

Practice transparency.

- Even though the public cannot affect every aspect of the decision, we need to ensure that the public has the full context and information they need to understand the entire project and provide input where asked.

Planning for Public Participation

Consider these four key factors as you begin planning for your project:

Make clear what you will get from good participation

1. Identify the desired benefits of participation.

- Start every project with a detailed discussion of how communities can help to make better decisions and ensure the effective implementation and management of these decisions long-term.

The whole team needs to commit

2. Get everyone on board.

- Discuss the value of participation with all leaders and staff before you begin your project.
- Clearly define what you hope to achieve.
- Help everyone involved in the project to see the value we hope to gain through participation.

Be clear about where you will consider public input

3. Identify where public input will matter.

- Focus public participation on the issues and in the areas where you are most likely to achieve success.
- Don't involve the community in everything, focus on areas that are most important to them and where they can have the biggest impact, and make sure to do that very well.

Communicate everything

4. Plan how you will communicate.

- Create clearly articulated statements as to why we are seeking participation and what we hope to achieve, so that everyone, including your community, understands the goals and potential benefits of participating.
- Make sure to not promise more participation than can be delivered or you are prepared to consider.

Designing Your Public Participation Program

As you design and begin to implement your participation program, make sure to establish the following:

Define what you hope to gain through public participation, and design a process to achieve it

1. Clear goals

- A well-defined purpose for the public's role in the project that is real, practical, and shared among stakeholders, including vulnerable populations and marginalized communities.
- Sponsoring agencies must determine the appropriate level or degree of public participation for the decision at hand and set the public's expectations accordingly.
- Making promises that cannot be kept will undermine public confidence in the agency.

2. Defined process

- A clear understanding about how the decision will be made and how public participation will be conducted within that process.

3. Specific opportunity for influence

- The real opportunity for public input to be considered in making the decision.

4. Commitment to the process

- Managers and staff alike must be committed to the full range of activities required to make public participation work and be willing to obtain and consider public input in making the decision.

5. Inclusive and effective representation

- Reaching out to representatives of the full range of relevant stakeholder interests.



GROUP DISCUSSION

Conditions for Good Public Participation

Consider the conditions for good public participation discussed above and consider the following:

What are the key constraints that we need to consider, to what degree can they be overcome?

How can we work within our organizations to improve our overall understanding of and commitment to doing better public participation?

What are the types of issues and challenges where public input could really make a difference in the decisions we make?

How could we increase our level of transparency with the public?