



Planning Public Participation in Environmental Decision Making

A practical guide for getting the most out of citizen inclusion efforts



About this guide

This guide is designed to be a practical resource for those who wish to engage in public participation activities, but don't know where to start. The goal of this guide is not to provide a magic formula, but rather to alert you to key challenges and considerations before you undertake the complex but rewarding process of public participation. It contains the following:

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Intro to Public Participation

It is important not to think of public participation as a single event added at the end of normal decision making processes. Instead, public participation is a *process* that involves the public in various stages of decision making, problem solving, project planning, etc. There is no single method of public participation. Rather, public participation can and should take many forms, depending on a variety of factors.



Who is the public?

It may be tempting to think of “the public” as one big group that includes everybody other than those sponsoring the public involvement effort. In a sense, this is true. Public participation does present an opportunity for anyone who might be affected by—who has a stake in—the decision to make their voice heard. As [Bill Weidman](#) rightly notes, “the first principle in defining ‘the public’ is to realize that ‘the public’ does not exist except as an aggregate of many, many publics...[it] does not exist anymore than does the ‘average family’ of 2.3 children” (34). Accordingly, it may be more useful to think of the various “publics” that will have a stake in decisions, such as interest groups, government agencies, communities, and individuals.

Why involve the public?

For many, public participation efforts are required by law, but it is important not to let this mandate obscure the underlying principles that drive such rule. Public participation aims to make decision making processes both more *effective* and *ethical*.

Public participation is no magic bullet, and it is not easy. That said, it does afford the sponsoring group a number of benefits:

- **Distributed expertise.** Participants will have expertise and perspectives on the decision that the sponsoring group will not. In this respect, public participation is a form of free consulting.
- **Reduced conflict and litigation.** Decisions will benefit some more than others. Dialogue allows grievances to be aired and addressed, and potential litigation can be identified before decisions are made.
- **Legitimacy and acceptance.** Participation makes decision making processes more transparent and inclusive. When publics are consulted and their input is considered, they are more likely to understand and accept the outcome.

While public participation efforts are measured by whether or not they achieved the "right" outcome, it is important to remember that public inclusion is often simply just the right thing to do. Public participation initiatives should not only be thought of as means to an end, but an end in their own right.



Spectrum of Public Influence

Determining the level of influence that you are legally allowed or otherwise willing to grant participants is perhaps the most important task prior to planning a public participation effort. Different goals for participation carry with them implied promises on the part of the sponsoring organization. Figure 1 clarifies the levels of influence and the associated goals and promises.


		Increasing impact on the decision 				
		Inform	Consult	Involve	Collaborate	Empower
Public Participation Goal	To provide the public relevant information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives, and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.	
Promise to the Public	We will keep you informed.	We'll inform you, listen to and acknowledge concerns, and provide feedback on how your input influenced the decision. We'll seek your feedback on drafts/proposals.	We'll work with you to ensure your concerns are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.	

Figure 1: *The International Association for Public Participation's Public Participation Spectrum*

The target level of influence will determine the most appropriate method of public inclusion. Further, incorrectly identifying the appropriate level or failing to deliver on a stated level of influence carries significant risks. For example, if a sponsoring organization agrees to incorporate stakeholder advice but ultimately neglects the advice without justification, the participants are likely to be dissatisfied. As such, clearly identifying and communicating the appropriate level of participant influence at the outset is absolutely essential.

Situation Assessment / Issue Identification

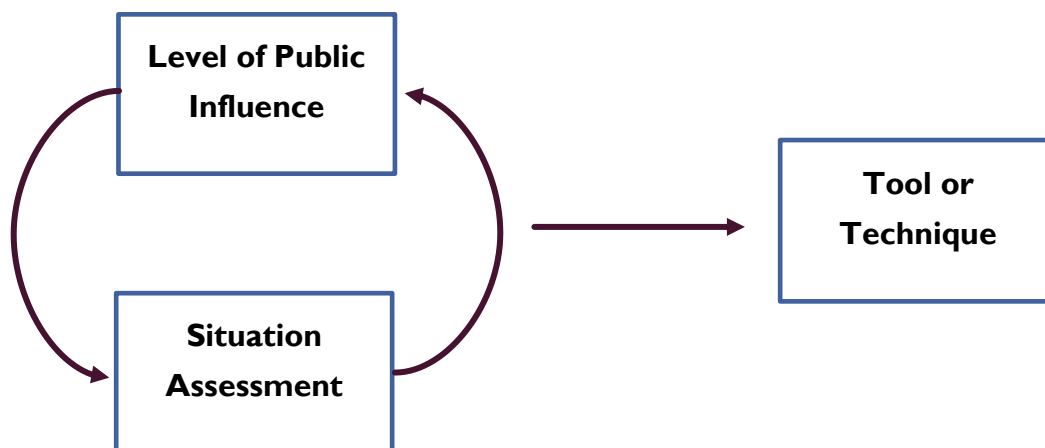
Situation assessment is key to successful planning and implementing public participation efforts. According to the [US EPA's Public Inclusion Guide](#), a successful situation assessment should:

- Clarify the problem or opportunity to be addressed and the decision to be made
- Define the sponsor organization's approach to public participation
- Identify stakeholders and their concerns, including marginalized communities
- Reveal information gaps or misunderstandings early enough so they can be addressed
- Identify potential constraints on the public participation process
- Surface issues that will need to be considered in the decision process

For a thorough discussion of how to conduct a situation assessment, refer to the [EPA's guide](#).

At this stage, it is critical to resist the urge to assume that the problem is only scientific or technical in nature and therefore requires no or limited public participation. Doing so may open up your organization to charges of excluding relevant parties or avoiding dialogue on relevant issues. To be sure, not all aspects of your project will be relevant to all publics. But at the same time, it is unlikely that *no* aspect of your project has a political dimension.

Ultimately, the situation assessment should be considered alongside the feasible and desired level of participant influence. Taken together, these will help determine the most appropriate public participation tool for a given project.



Tools and Techniques

There are a number of tools and techniques that can be used in a public participation effort. Importantly, the appropriate tool depends on the situation (i.e. issue to be addressed and appropriate level of influence). And realistically, a number of different tools may be used at different stages of a given project.

This section highlights some of the advantages and disadvantages of various techniques, which have been grouped by the approximate level of public influence they afford (information synthesized and adapted from IAPP, US EPA, and Weidman).



Inform

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Fact sheet, newsletter	Easy and relatively cheap to implement; can reach lots of people across space and time	Affords little opportunity for dialogue; no information is gathered; it is difficult to measure effectiveness
Web site	Easy and relatively cheap to implement; can reach everyone with internet access	Affords little opportunity for dialogue; no information is gathered; it is difficult to measure effectiveness
Press outreach	Great way to reach large audiences, especially for projects of widespread interest	Affords little opportunity for dialogue; no information is gathered; it is difficult to measure effectiveness

Consult

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Public meeting	Excellent for small, engaged communities; easier to plan than multi-site or –day activities	Limited by space and geographic proximity; provides limited opportunity for ongoing, in-depth dialogue
Focus group	Affords in-depth exploration of attitudes and opinions	Structure may overly constrain the topics discussed; can encourage groupthink
Interviews	Affords in-depth exploration of individual attitudes and opinions	Requires a significant time investment if numerous individuals must be interviewed; poorly conducted interviews can lead to misleading data
Public comment	Affords a large number of participants; can be conducted over time and participants need not all participate from the same location	Affords little to know opportunity for ongoing dialogue; poorly-framed invitations for comment can lead to useless responses and dissatisfied participants

Involve

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Workshop	Can be structured to accommodate a large range of participants; affords opportunity for small- and large-group dialogue	Requires significant planning and structure to be effective
Deliberative polling	Can be structured to accommodate a large range of participants; affords concrete, quantitative data on attitudes and opinions	Requires significant planning and structure to be effective

Collaborate

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Citizen advisory board	Affords ongoing, in-depth participation; great for complex, multi-stage issues	Requires significant time investment on the part of participants; limited participants
Consensus conference	Can be structured to accommodate a large range of participants; affords in-depth dialogue	Requires significant planning and structure to be effective

Empower

	Advantages	Disadvantages
Citizen jury	Results in a clear decision; great for issues that have easily-delineated options	Limited number of participants; requires significant time investment on the part of participants; requires significant planning and structure to be effective; sponsoring agency has limited influence
Delegated decision	Results in a clear decision; great for issues that have easily-delineated options	Limited number of participants; requires significant time investment on the part of participants; sponsoring agency has limited influence

In the spirit of democratic inclusion, it is desirable to select techniques in which participants have more influence when feasible. However, there will no doubt be a number of factors constraining any given public participation scenario. The complexity of this process and myriad options highlights the importance of thorough situation assessment and effective communication.

You should now have a better sense of what public participation is and why you should do it as well as some insight into how to approach the process. To learn more, I suggest browsing the [EPA's wonderful collection of case studies and additional resources](#).

