

Participatory Processes with Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CaLD) Groups

By Wendy Sarkissian

Groups within a community may be of non-English-speaking background (NESB) or from “culturally diverse backgrounds.” They may be of different ethnicity and of a different language background, or they may be visibly different but have been here for generations (as with Australian-born Chinese). However defined, this is a highly heterogeneous group.

In Australia, many proponents, governments and others are making a significant effort to engage people from different cultural groups and those who speak English as a second language in participatory processes. Nevertheless, despite intensive work with people from a number of ethnic backgrounds, participation is often quite low. Webber and Willis speculate that this may reflect either inadequacy in the consultation process or a lack of interest or concern about the project.

While there are no techniques which will work in all situations, some specific strategies are necessary¹ when undertaking participatory planning work with ethnic communities. They are summarised below.

- Ensure adequate representation. Remember that one person is generally NOT able to effectively represent the view of all ethnic communities within a given area. Do not rely exclusively on canvassing the views of peak agencies and/or ethnic service providers. Do not rely on the views of a single community leader or association.
- Provide direct representation and access to participatory processes.
- Do not ignore the needs of small or emerging ethnic communities.
- Keep an open mind and be willing to learn and adapt; demonstrate consistency and reliability.

The most important requirement is flexibility. *Consulting the Multicultural Way* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994) identified some important requirements for flexibility:

- Keep an open mind and be willing to learn and adapt; demonstrate consistency and reliability.
- Be alert to the different ways people interact.
- Be aware of differences in gender roles which may require separate women-only groups.
- Ensure that women are adequately represented on advisory groups.
- Seek to understand the protocols of different groups.
- Develop an empathy with those who may have experienced great trauma, in addition to the normal trauma of the immigration process.
- Be willing to provide information and give something back to the community and to individuals.
- Seek input from ethnic community groups and organisations.
- Accept that some people will not respond to consultation and outreach.

When designing a process, consider:

- The size of the community
- English language proficiency
- Demographic and socio-demographic status
- Length of residence
- Urban/rural location and
- Levels of community organisation and infrastructure.

The reader is directed to the full document for further information.

Participatory processes should include both participation by **ethnic-specific** communities and involvement of ethnic community representatives in **generic** structures and processes:

¹ This section is a summary of the excellent 1994 publication: New South Wales Department of Community Services (1994). *Community Consultation: NSW Department of Community Services Consultation Protocol*.

- Use existing networks and structures.
- Advertise in the ethnic media.
- Identify ethnic community stakeholders (representatives of ethnic communities).
- Liaise with ethnic service providers and consumer groups or forums.
- Employ bilingual facilitators and/or interpreters.
- Ensure involvement of ethnic advisers, bilingual workers and/or skilled translators in the preparation of agendas and meeting or process format.
- Provide opportunities for language-specific and programs.
- Avoid using children as interpreters. Not only may their ability to interpret accurately not be known, but it can create differences in the power balance and respect between the generations, thereby disempowering parents and other older adults. This is particularly important if sensitive issues, such as women's health, are being discussed.
- Pay attention to practical arrangements (seating, briefing, and so forth).
- Include in reporting and feedback from participatory processes a record of ethnic community participation, as well as their views on the issues raised.
- Collect adequate background information on local ethnic communities (profiles of ethnic communities, needs, services, etc.).
- Ensure that reports include both a full report of ethnic participation, including their satisfaction with the process, as well as the issues raised.
- Pay particular attention to jargon or slang which may have discriminatory implications.
- Pay particular attention to body language: gestures that are accepted in one culture might be misunderstood or even considered offensive in another.

Participatory Processes with Aboriginal and Islander People

Only a few of our participatory processes have specifically involved Aboriginal and Islander people. Thus, we have relied on advice from others – some excellent work on consultation with Aboriginal and Islander people about homes on Aboriginal and Islander land; a major study of housing for Aboriginal people; a study of housing consultation in remote Aboriginal communities, and the New South Wales Department of Community Services 1994 consultation protocol guidelines.

All writers on this topic emphasise one basic principle, as Aboriginal lawyer Larissa Behrendt explains: "The non-Aboriginal community needs to be educated about Aboriginal experience and perspectives. Approaching Aboriginal communities with a lack of understanding of what the issues in their lives are like shows a half-hearted attempt to conduct a relationship on equal footing."

Looking specifically at housing needs, Paul Memmot points out that there are many reasons why an Aboriginal and Islander person may not respond meaningfully to inquiries: the questioner's clumsiness in putting questions; the client's possible shyness or "shame"; disillusionment or anger; a perceived lack of power; fear of imagined reprisal from authority figures; a dependency on community leaders to make such decisions, and so on. It is always wise to consult with local Aboriginal and Islander representatives to ensure that your processes are culturally appropriate. Ask yourself, does your process consult Aboriginal and Islander people but not give them the power to make *decisions* about projects or program which affect them?

Helen Ross has argued that, "If control had priority over consultation, Aboriginal people might be able to decide which projects were to be undertaken, and, within the context of a project they had deliberated upon, could decide which aspects of the implementation to control directly, and which to contract out for implementation by someone else.

"The difference between being allowed to decide whether one wants a project (such as housing) in the first place is a vastly different thing from offering opinions on the detail of projects already decided on by more powerful authorities." At worst, according to Ross, consultation merely permits Aboriginal and Islander people to give assent to plans made for them. At best, "it permits them to take the initiative in describing their requirements, in the confidence that their wishes will be carried out."

The following guidelines should be carefully considered in process design, either for processes to facilitate the participation of Aboriginal and Islander people in general processes, as well as for developing particular strategies targeted at Aboriginal and Islander people:

- Be patient and flexible. Religious or cultural activities may take priority and may result in the

cancellation of your proposed consultations.

- Try to find a common language, speech style and appropriate vocabulary and concepts for analysing needs. If necessary, establish a working relationship with an interpreter to ensure mutual intelligibility. At all times, avoid what some Aboriginal and Islander people call “high English”.
- Pay attention to question-and-answer styles and develop techniques to overcome possible “courtesy biases” in responses.²
- Learn appropriate use of body language and small-group spatial behaviour for effective and comfortable interaction, including appropriate and acceptable styles of presentation by facilitators and others seen as “expert”.
- Find out about participatory processes which have been designed and controlled by Aboriginal and Islander people dealing with the same issue or similar issues and use that information to guide your strategy.
- Seek to understand the context of your inquiry: ask people about their environmental experiences, individual life histories; ask people to reflect on these experiences so that they may come to an understanding of their own needs. A thorough understanding of community dynamics adds depth to a consultation.
- Suppress your own enthusiasm about your own beliefs, ideas and solutions. Recognise your own ethnocentric preconceptions.
- Use a multi-faceted approach, with discussions with individual Aboriginal and Islander people, local, regional and state Land Councils and community organisations.
- Try to ensure that the participatory process enables Aboriginal and Islander people to express their needs with confidence.
- Allow adequate time to permit wide discussion and reflection on alternative options. Establishing reliable and meaningful communication with Aboriginal and Islander individuals and households can take much longer and require more organisation than expected. Often the necessary decision-making may not be able to take place in one meeting. Misleading results may emerge if people do not have adequate time to explore their ideas before a consultation.
- Focus on specific issues rather than general consultations if possible: this is likely to attract more significant participation.
- Try to provide extensive control of the process by Aboriginal and Islander people.
- Where possible, try to include a training and employment component as part of all consultative or participatory processes.³
- Make appropriate use of Aboriginal and Islander field staff in preparing material, pre-publicity, facilitating meetings or workshops, and/or use facilitators who are skilled and experienced in working with Aboriginal and Islander people.
- Be prepared and direct: effective preparation, straight-forward information provision and a preparedness to listen are essential qualities.
- Early in the process, identify and seek to understand the dynamics between key community and organisational stakeholders. Seek to understand the social identities and roles of participants in relation to the community’s social structure. This includes trying to understand local factionalism, political undercurrents and current community conflicts and their possible impact on a process or project.
- Seek to understand the history of contact between Aboriginal and Islander people and proponents, developers, service providers and the government generally and consider how this legacy will impact on your desire to build trust and openness in your processes.
- Pay attention to gender: women may be deterred from speaking because of shyness, deference to men’s assumed rights to assert public roles, or lack of encouragement from meeting organisers.
- Try to avoid consultations on the days when benefits are paid, as that is usually very inconvenient for most Aboriginal and Islander people.
- Present a wide range of different ideas.
- As plans are often difficult to understand, use visual aids: diagrams, perspectives, and

² According to Memmot (1997: 24), a “courtesy bias” occurs when one gives an interviewer the answer one thinks the interviewer would prefer to hear.

³ Larissa Behrendt sounds a warning about employing Aboriginal and Islander people: “If an Aboriginal person in their employ is perceived by an institution as being a link to the Aboriginal community, he or she needs to have *real* access to the Aboriginal community. If elders are not employed, a person who is expected to give the opinion of the community must have access to and respect for the opinions of the leaders of the community she or he is suppose to be representing.”

photographs. Make sure that all design and plans of buildings show notional furniture arrangements to give a scale and comparative size.

- Treat consultation as an ongoing process from the initial process to the final implementation stages.

The design of settlements and dwellings for Aboriginal and Islander people in Australia is a special issue and has had a chequered history. While it is not appropriate here to explore the dimensions of this problem, some key principles can be used to guide planning and design processes related to housing. For example:

- Discuss with Aboriginal and Islander people as many of the management and associated factors as possible, including economic factors.
- Discuss the locations of the settlement as a whole, particularly in relation to natural features, such as hills and bush, the built environment, and other Aboriginal and Islander communities and camps.
- When working out, in consultation, the basic elements of a town plan pay particular attention to intergroup and interhousehold distances and their positioning relative to one another.

It is important to offer alternatives to meetings, especially one-off meetings. While a meeting may be suitable for introducing an issue, there is no guarantee that a meeting will bring together those who should be consulted. Often, according to Ross, important views are not heard in meetings, either because social roles do not allow certain people to speak up in this type of forum or because it would not be proper for them to oppose others in so public a setting. Further, many may not understand what is being said; others may be absent on other business.

Finally, it is important to view participatory processes with Aboriginal and Islander people as opportunities for empowerment whereby "the Aboriginal client can be brought to understand the design issues, review their own priorities and needs and evaluate progressive designs." As with other cultural groups, this process cannot be fast-tracked.

For more information:

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