

Guiding Principles for Community Planning

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*In **The Community Planning Handbook**, Nick Wates presents an A-Z of general principles, which may apply to a range of local situations. They are reproduced here as an aid to community activists, practitioners and other interested parties. Publication details about the Handbook can be found at the end of this guide.*

Accept different agendas	People will want to be involved for a variety of reasons, for instance: academic enquiry, altruism, curiosity, fear of change, financial gain, neighbourliness, professional duty, protection of interests, socialising. This need not be a problem but it helps to be aware of people's different agendas.
Accept limitations	No community planning activity can solve all the world's problems. But that is not a reason for holding back. Limited practical improvements will almost always result, and community planning activities can often act as a catalyst for more fundamental change.
Accept varied commitment	Far too much energy is wasted complaining that certain people do not participate when the opportunity is provided. All of us could spend our lives many times over working to improve the local environment. Everyone has their own priorities in life and these should be respected. If people do not participate it is likely to be because they are happy to let others get on with it, they are busy with things which are more important to them or the process has not been made sufficiently interesting.
Agree rules and boundaries	There should be a common understanding by all the main interest groups of the approach being adopted. Particularly in communities where there is fear – for instance that others may be trying to gain territorial advantage – it is vital that the rules and boundaries are clearly understood and agreed.
Avoid jargon	Use plain language. Jargon prevents people from engaging and is usually a smokescreen to hide incompetence, ignorance and arrogance.

Be honest	Be open and straightforward about the nature of any activity. People will generally participate more enthusiastically if they know something can be achieved through their participation (<i>e.g.</i> if there is a budget for a capital project). But they may be quite prepared to participate <i>at risk</i> providing they know the odds. If there is only a small chance of positive change as a result of people participating, say so. Avoid hidden agendas.
Be transparent	The objectives and people's roles should be clear and transparent at events. For instance, it may seem trivial but the importance of name badges to prevent events being the preserve of the <i>in-crowd</i> can never be stressed enough.
Be visionary yet realistic	Nothing much is likely to be achieved without raising expectations. Yet dwelling entirely on the utopian can be frustrating. Strike a balance between setting visionary utopian goals and being realistic about the practical options available.
Build local capacity	Long-term community sustainability depends on developing human and social capital. Take every opportunity to develop local skills and capacity. Involve local people in surveying their own situation, running their own programmes and managing local assets.
Communicate	Use all available media to let people know what you are doing and how they can get involved. In particular community newspapers or broadsheets are invaluable.
Encourage collaboration	Create partnerships wherever possible between the various interest groups involved and with potential contributors such as financial institutions.
Flexibility	Be prepared to modify processes as circumstances dictate. Avoid inflexible methods and strategies.
Focus on attitudes	Behaviour and attitude are just as, if not more, important than methods. Encourage self-critical awareness, handing over control, personal responsibility and sharing.
Follow-up	Lack of follow-up is the most common failing, usually due to a failure to plan and budget for it. Make sure you set aside time and resources for documenting, publicising and acting on the results of any community planning initiative.
Go at the right pace	Rushing can lead to problems. On the other hand, without deadlines things can drift. Using experienced external advisers may speed up the process but often at the expense of developing local capacity. Get the balance right.
Go for it	This is the phrase used most by people who have experienced community planning when asked what their advice would be to others. You are bound to have doubts. It is usually a leap in the dark. But you are unlikely to regret taking the plunge.

Have fun	Getting involved in creating and managing the environment should not be a chore. It can be a great opportunity to meet people and have fun. The most interesting and sustainable environments have been produced where people have enjoyed creating them. Community planning requires humour. Use cartoons, jokes and games whenever possible.
Human scale	Work in communities of manageable scale. This is usually where people at least recognise each other. Where possible, break up larger areas into a series of smaller ones.
Involve all those affected	Community planning works best if all parties are committed to it. Involve all the main interested parties as early as possible, preferably in the planning process. Activities in which key players (such as landowners or planners) sit on the sidelines are all too common and rarely completely achieve their objectives. Time spent winning over doubters before you start is well worthwhile. If there are people or groups, who cannot be convinced at the outset, keep them informed and give them the option of joining in later on.
Involve all sections of the community	People of different ages, gender, backgrounds and cultures almost invariably have different concerns and perspectives on issues. Ensure that a full spectrum of the community is involved. This is usually far more important than involving large numbers.
Learn from others	There is no need to re-invent the wheel. One of the best sources of information is people who have done it before. Don't think you know it all. No one does. Be open to new approaches. Get in touch with people from elsewhere who have relevant experience. Go visit them and see their projects – seeing is believing. Do not be afraid of experienced consultants but choose and brief them carefully.
Local ownership Process	Local people should own the community-planning process. Even though consultants or national organisations may be providing funding, advice and taking responsibility for certain activities, the local community should take responsibility for the overall process.
Maintain momentum	Regularly monitor progress to ensure that initiatives are built on and objectives achieved or altered. Development processes are invariably lengthy; the participation process needs to stay the course. If there has to be a break, start again from where you left off, not from the beginning. Periodic review sessions can be very valuable to maintain momentum and community involvement.
Mixture of methods	Use a variety of coherent and compatible involvement methods, as different people will want to take part in different ways. For instance, some will be happy to write letters, others will prefer to make comments at an exhibition or take part in workshop sessions.
Now is the time	The best time to start involving people is at the beginning of any programme - the earlier the better. But if programmes have already begun, participation should be introduced as soon as possible. Start now.

Personal initiative	Virtually all community-planning initiatives have happened only because an individual has taken the initiative. Don't wait for others. That individual could be you.
Plan your own process carefully	Careful planning of the process is vital. Avoid rushing into any one approach. Look at alternatives. Design a process to suit the circumstances. This may well involve combining a range of methods or devising new ones.
Plan for the local context	Develop unique strategies for each neighbourhood. Understand local characteristics and vernacular traditions and use them as a starting point for planning. Encourage regional and local diversity.
Prepare properly	The most successful activities are invariably those on which sufficient time and effort have been given to preliminary organise and engage those who may be interested.
Process is as important as product	The way things are done is often as important as the end result. But remember that the aim is implementation. Participation in community planning is important but is not an end itself.
Professional enablers	Professionals and administrators should see themselves as enablers, helping local people achieve their goals, rather than as providers of services and solutions.
Quality not quantity	There is no such thing as a perfect participation process. The search for one is healthy only if this fact is accepted. Generally, the maximum participation by the maximum number of people is worth aiming at. But any participation is better than none and the quality of participation is more important than the numbers involved. A well-organised event for a small number of people can often be more fruitful than a less well-organised event for larger numbers.
Record and document	Make sure participation activities are properly recorded and documented so that it can be clearly seen who has been involved and how. Easily forgotten, such records can be invaluable at a later stage.
Respect cultural context	Make sure that your approach is suitable for the cultural context in which you are working. Consider local attitudes to gender, informal livelihoods, social groupings, speaking out in public and so on.
Respect local knowledge	All people, whether literate or not, whether rich or poor, whether children, women or men, have a remarkable understanding of their surroundings and are capable of analysing and assessing their situation, often better than trained professionals. Respect local perceptions, choices, and abilities and involve local people in setting goals and strategies.
Shared control	The extent of public participation in any activity can vary from very little to a great deal. Different levels are appropriate at different stages of the planning process but shared control at the planning and design stage is the crucial ingredient.

Spend money	Effective participation processes take time and energy. There are methods to suit a range of budgets and much can be achieved using only people's time and energy. But over tight budgets usually lead to cutting corners and poor results. Remember that community planning is an important activity, the success or failure of which may have dramatic implications for future generations as well as your own resources. The cost of building the wrong thing in the wrong place can be astronomical and make the cost of proper community planning pale into insignificance. Budget generously.
Think on your feet	Once the basic principles and language of participatory planning are understood, experienced practitioners will find it easy to improvise. Avoid feeling constrained by rules or guidance provided in handbooks. Use your own best judgement.
Train	Training is invaluable at all levels. Encourage visits to other projects and attendance on courses. Build in training to all your activities. However avoid training becoming an end itself.
Trust in others' honest	Start from a position of trusting others and generally this will be reciprocated. Lack of trust is usually due to lack of information.
Use experts appropriately	The best results emerge when local people work closely and intensively with experts from all the necessary disciplines. Creating and managing the environment is very complicated and requires a variety of expertise and experiences to do it well. Do not be afraid of expertise - embrace it. But avoid dependency on, or hijacking by, professionals. Keep control local.
Use experts <i>little and often</i>	Use experts <i>little and often</i> to allow local participants time to develop capability even if it means they sometimes make mistakes.
Use facilitators	Orchestrating group activities is a real skill. Without good facilitation the most articulate and powerful may dominate. Particularly if large numbers of people are involved, ensure that the person or people directing events have good facilitation skills. If not, hire someone who has.
Use local talent	Make use of local skills and professionalism within the community before supplementing them with outside assistance. This will help develop capability within the community and help achieve long-term sustainability.
Use outsiders, but carefully	A central principle of community planning is that local people know best. But outsiders, if well briefed, can provide a fresh perspective, which can be invigorating. Getting the right balance between locals and outsiders is important – avoid locals feeling swamped or intimidated.

Visualise	People can participate far more effectively if certain types of planning information are presented visually rather than in words. A great deal of poor development, and hostility to good development, is due to people not understanding what it will look like. Use simple graphics, maps, illustrations, cartoons, drawings, photomontages and models wherever possible. And make the process itself visible by using flipcharts, post-it notes, coloured dots and banners, etc.
Walk before you run	Developing a participatory culture takes time. Start by using simple participation methods and work up to using more complex ones as experience and confidence grow.
Work on location	Wherever possible, base community planning activities physically in the area being planned. This makes it much easier for everyone to bridge the gap from concept to reality.

Further Reading

The Community Planning Handbook: How people can shape their cities, towns and villages in any part of the world.

Nick Wates, Earthscan, 230pages, 2000. Price £14.95 ISBN 1 85383 654 0

The handbook provides a practical guide to planning and running community participation projects irrespective of location. The author provides a list of methods, fully explained. From planning an activity week to user groups, each method can be important in its own right, but together they can be a very effective approach to community planning. Also laid out are some general principles for consideration such as the need to accept varying agendas, the necessity of transparency, and the importance of utilising local knowledge.

Making Micro-plans: A community based process in programming and development.

Reinhard Goethert and Nabeel Hamdi, Intermediate Technology Publications, 160 pages, 1988. ISBN 1 85339 085 2

Micro-planning is a community-based process, which enables local people to prepare and implement programmes for settlement upgrading and regeneration. The aim is that local participants contribute not only to the content but also to the structure of the programme so that plans are not pre-packaged and handed down to local communities by governments and funding agencies. What often stops people from solving their housing and other problems is not so much lack of skills or willingness but an adequate framework for articulating problems, defining solutions, and building consensus and partnerships. After the first chapter which deals with the theory of Micro-planning, chapter two shows the methods illustrated in practice through a community-based workshop in La Pintana, low-income community outside of

Santiago, Chile, and in chapter three a workshop in Sri Lanka. Section II of the book includes the handbook itself for readers to carry out their own workshops.

The Urban Poor as Agents of Development: Community Action Planning in Sri Lanka

United Nations Centre for Human Settlements (UN Habitat), 88 pages, Nairobi 1993, (HS/278/93E) ISBN 92 1 131203 5

This publication describes the principles and the application of the community action planning and implementation approach (or CAP). The approach was developed and introduced by the Urban Housing Division of the National Housing Development Authority (NHDA) of Sri Lanka in its urban housing programme to improve the living conditions in low-income settlements in the mid 1980s. Unlike conventional planning and implementation approaches of national housing agencies, the CAP approach is people-centred, support-based and multi-sectoral. Its aim is to empower the urban poor to improve their living conditions through self-help, with external agencies acting as supporters and facilitators. Because development is a multi-faceted process, the approach focuses not only on shelter and infrastructure, but also on social and economic issues such as savings and credit associations, income generation and the improvement in the position of women and children.