



# Authentic and effective participation

**Both consumers and service providers** want the experience of participation to be meaningful and not tokenistic. Perhaps more important than the strategy chosen to engage consumers is the underlying approach to consumer participation. Authentic and effective participation requires capacity building, resourcing and reliable feedback loops so that participants know they are making a difference.

## Authentic participation

**Authenticity: The form that participation takes is less important than that people see and feel a direct connection between what they do and what is subsequently achieved.**<sup>1</sup>

When asked what makes participation meaningful, consumers tend to identify receiving feedback on their input, and being able to see changes that have resulted from their input.

*"[Participation is meaningful when] they ask for input and we get results of feedback; instead of input disappearing into a big rubbish bin in sky—the dump".<sup>2</sup>*

For participation to be authentic:

- The process of participation must be transparent;
- Consumers require information about the organisation's decision making processes;
- The organisation must acknowledge the input it receives and provide feedback about the impact and value of the consumer's contribution;
- Feedback to consumers has to be clear and timely (with pre-determined time lines);
- Issues that are raised that are outside the organisation's area of responsibility must be acknowledged and some alternative strategy considered.

To avoid tokenism all parties need a clear and shared understanding of what is meant by consumer participation. Organisations need to approach consumer participation with an attitude of flexibility, but also communicate very clearly about what aspects can (or cannot) be changed; what action can be taken; and when advocacy for change needs to be mobilized.

## Effective participation

Effectiveness is vital to sustaining consumer participation. It is important to visibly document and represent success that will maintain the momentum that participation creates.<sup>3</sup>

To be effective, both consumers and organisations need to have the capacity to participate. Consumers need to be supported to participate, and organisations need the commitment, resources and skills to share decision making with consumers and to support their participation.

### Organisational capacity building

Organisations need to build their capacity to facilitate and support consumer participation.<sup>4</sup> This requires development of:

- Transparent participatory policy and processes. These should include a standard and equitable means of identifying stakeholders in the participation process, and open and accountable processes for integrating consumer perspectives into organisational planning and evaluation. Staff require clear information about consumer participation
- A supportive organisational culture. Consumer participation should be embedded in the way everyone works, not the responsibility of one member of staff. It needs to be part of all roles, and all position descriptions. Any lack of trust between consumers and the organisation must also be addressed in order to build an organisational culture that supports consumer participation.
- Information and expertise to support consumer efforts. For staff to engage effectively in consumer participation strategies, training is recommended.<sup>5</sup>
- Dedicated resources to support consumer participation.

### Consumers' capacity building

People who have been homeless or have been in insecure housing do not necessarily have the capacity required to participate within organisational decision-making processes. They may need to be supported in acquiring social and other skills and resources that are a precondition for full participation (Demos p43).

Organisations can support this process by providing:

- A safe and positive environment (environment and peers matter, especially to people abstaining, withdrawing and or rehabilitating from substance abuse)
- The ability for consumers to choose the extent to which they participate
- Confidentiality
- Transport (taxi vouchers, met cards, petrol vouchers, community buses)

- Recognition (e.g. a movie voucher or other method of regular recognition)
- Authority - participation needs to be seen to have some influence. Consumers are wary of wasting their time
- Encouragement - staff members encouraging consumers to participate is especially important
- A learning outcome for consumers – consumers want to learn something during and from the (participation) process
- Training: knowledge and skills development. Consumers require skills to participate and to



Ensure that training is in a form appropriate to consumers. One consumer commented that "You can do more training at a BBQ than in a formal training session".

effectively represent other consumers. This might include e.g. a knowledge of meeting procedures, or public speaking training.

*"Informed and skilled representatives are able to interact on more equal, 'professional' level with representatives of the organization"*

- Refreshments
- Opportunities for socialising and networking. "To know what is happening in other areas, [participants need] opportunities to get together; to see whether they have got same problems; to compare areas; to learn solutions"
- Childcare continues to be necessary to ensure parents can participate

### Payment and reimbursement

Whether payment for participation is appropriate depends on the context. If in receipt of Centrelink benefits, consumers may prefer to be 'reimbursed' for the costs incurred rather than 'paid'. Tenant representatives may argue that it is important NOT to be paid for their representation, in order to be seen to be independent. Consumer consultants on the other hand are often paid a wage in recognition of their contribution to the organisation.

In general, reimbursement of expenses is essential and acknowledgements are appreciated. A budget for this must be part of a CP strategy.

### A shared vision and empowering collaborative action

Successful participatory processes have been found to be dependent on the early identification and articulation of an agreed vision and goals. This visioning process must seek to promote a balance between

self-interest and the common good (Cuthill and Fein 2005). Collaborative action is the visible expression of a participatory relationship between consumers and organisations. A collaborative approach promotes dialogue where stakeholders come together 'to deliberate about and decide together'<sup>6</sup> on matters that affect them.

The relationship between consumers and organisations in collaborative initiatives can be most transparent where a distinction is drawn between the 'empowerment' and 'betterment' approaches<sup>7</sup> to collaboration, and stakeholders agree on which is being used. The betterment approach involves community being 'invited into a process designed and controlled by larger institutions', whereas the empowerment approach 'begins with the community itself' and involves other stakeholders as the collaboration evolves (Morse 1996:10).

In this framework, facilitating collaboration requires stakeholders to negotiate up front about who is driving the collaboration, thereby establishing an appropriate locus of control for that collaboration. This approach acknowledges the pragmatic reality in that the power within any collaboration will depend on factors such as the abilities, commitment and intention of those people involved, the nature of the collaboration, the issues to be addressed and the time and resources available to stakeholders (Morse 1996).

### Endnotes

1. Skidmore, P & Craig, J (2005). *Start with people: How community organisations put people in the driving seat*. Demos, London. p.41. Viewed October 2007 at <http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/startwithpeople>
2. Consumer quotes in this section are from consumers present at focus groups during the consultation phase of the Consumer Participation Resource Kit project.
3. Skidmore & Craig (2005) p.42.
4. Cuthill, M & Fein, J (2005). Capacity building: Facilitating citizen participation in local governance. *Australian Journal of Public Administration* 64(4) pp.63-80: December 2005. Blackwell Publishing Ltd.
5. See the Banyule Nillumbik Primary Care Alliance (BNPCA) *Consumer Participation Resource & Training Kit for Service Providers* (2003) at <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/pcps/publications/banyule.htm>
6. Morse, S (1996). *Building Collaborative Communities*. Leadership Collaboration Series, Pew Partnership for Civic Change.
7. Himmelman, A (1995). *Collaboration for Change*. University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.