

AUSTRALIAN DISASTER RESILIENCE HANDBOOK COLLECTION

Practitioner's Guide: Understanding and addressing challenges in community engagement

Companion to *Community Engagement for Disaster Resilience* (AIDR 2020)

This document complements *Community Engagement for Disaster Resilience* (AIDR 2020). It is available as an online resource on the Australian Disaster Resilience Knowledge Hub:
<https://knowledge.aidr.org.au/resources/handbook-community-engagement>

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Practitioner's Guide: Understanding and addressing challenges in community engagement

This document complements *Community Engagement for Disaster Resilience (AIDR 2020)*.

This document provides practical advice to identify and address potential challenges in the process of community engagement.

Some challenges can be anticipated while others may emerge unexpectedly. Challenges may arise due to a specific set of circumstances or may apply more broadly to a range of common engagement processes.

Challenges that might arise

Partners, community leaders and members are encouraged to meet in the early stages of any community engagement process, to identify and discuss likely challenges to the success of that process.

A thorough approach to addressing potential challenges involves identifying those challenges, assessing their likely consequences, and developing strategies and actions to mitigate the challenge and maximise success. It is important to review the community engagement process regularly over time, to identify any additional challenges that arise and adjust the process accordingly. Some potential challenges are outlined below.

EARLY ENGAGEMENT

Challenge	Approaching and accessing the partner or community to establish and build an effective relationship
Consequence	Outcomes for the community will be compromised if a relationship between the partner and community cannot be established or is not effective.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Take time to understand the community and its context and history.• Take time to get to know partners, community leaders and other stakeholders to understand their aspirations and hopes for the process, their priorities, their desired outcomes and to build trust.• Identify and engage people who are trusted by the community to assist with engagement activities, or to facilitate access into a community.• Investigate specific protocols or practices for engaging with community groups, and apply these appropriately (e.g. Indigenous peoples, culturally and linguistically diverse groups and rural communities may have preferred elders or leaders from whom permission should be sought to engage with the community).• Be reliable and demonstrate integrity throughout the process. Meet commitments and treat everyone honestly and with respect.• Discuss and agree how partners and community members can raise concerns or issues during the process.• Listen to one another respectfully, and take time to resolve issues together.

Challenge	Partners and communities who are not able to access one another
Consequence	Establishing relationships and conducting an engagement process is more challenging if face-to-face contact is not possible.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use online processes where it is not possible to engage physically (e.g. due to the isolation of the affected community, the location of the partner, or the costs of travel). Numerous platforms can be useful for engaging with communities, including social media or video conferencing applications. • Carefully design and host get-togethers with a clear purpose and plan for the conversation (e.g. Art of Hosting methodologies). • Consider varying the approach to engagement (e.g. establishing deeper relationships with a core group of local community leaders and partners, and using that group to assist with broader community engagement). • Remember that lack of physical access can provide opportunities (e.g. some prefer to have conversations one-on-one from a distance, the timing of discussions may be more flexible, and travel time is eliminated).
Challenge	Choosing the best approach to community engagement
Consequence	Relationships can be compromised and outcomes less effective if the chosen approaches do not suit the community and partner.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider the range of approaches to community engagement and choose the most suitable approach based on the community's circumstances – refer to <i>Community Engagement for Disaster Resilience (2020)</i> and <i>Practitioner's Guide: How to choose between community engagement approaches (2020)</i>. • Discuss the various approaches with both partner and community, and make decisions about their use together. • Be flexible about the timing of the engagement and consider community priorities and activities (e.g. religious celebrations or events, school holidays, or peak seasons for industries or local businesses). • Regularly review and revise the approaches used during the engagement.

Challenge	Identifying, approaching and including diverse individuals and groups
Consequence	The engagement process and outcomes will not be as effective if diverse perspectives and experiences are not included. Outcomes for disaster resilience may be compromised for excluded groups and for the community as a whole.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve community representatives that have the trust and respect of diverse group across the community. • Establish an inclusive and accessible engagement process. Consider the following: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are meetings scheduled at different times of day, days of the week and in different locations? • Are locations accessible for those with a mobile impairment? • Is transport available for participants to attend? • Are caring responsibilities considered? • Have a range of people and groups been invited to activities and meetings? • Are different interests, backgrounds, genders and ages represented? • Be aware of 'tokenism' and understand that there is diversity within any group. • Notice who attends activities and meetings and who does not. • Find out the reasons why absent groups or individuals could not be involved. • Develop and implement strategies to enable participation from diverse groups and individuals. • Involve community members in reaching out to include other community members. • Use a range of communication methods according to community characteristics and needs (e.g. community noticeboards, social media, newsletters, local newspapers and radio, local community groups and networks). • Use plain English alongside other languages relevant to the community. • Involve interpreters and translators or a translator service for members of the community with other language backgrounds. • Consider the specific communications needs of individuals living with a disability. • Listen carefully to individuals and community groups. • Encourage people and groups to speak for themselves rather than to assume and speak for the views of others who are not present. • Record or document meeting and discussion outcomes and offer participants the opportunity to verify this record. • Take feedback and contributions into account when planning and taking action.

Challenge	Ensuring the process focuses on issues important to the community
Consequence	The process will be more difficult to sustain and less likely to succeed if community aspirations and priorities are not the focus.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Involve community leaders and members in planning and identifying the priorities and desired outcomes for the engagement. • Implement a regular monitoring process to check whether the engagement is proceeding as planned. • Involve the community in monitoring the engagement process. • Involve diverse groups and individuals in the process so that needs of these groups are represented.

Challenge	Effective communication
Consequence	If communication is not effective, conflict and misunderstandings are more likely, leading to strained relationships and less successful outcomes.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bring the community and partner(s) together to discuss and agree on methods of communication and engagement. • Use mixed and diverse methods to reach a broad audience. • Use plain English alongside other languages relevant to the community. • Involve interpreters and translators or a translator service for members of the community with other language backgrounds. • Consider the specific communications needs of individuals living with a disability. • Recognise that the style of words and language varies across sectors (e.g. government, non-government, private sector and the community). • Check for understanding and be prepared to clarify and reinforce key messages multiple times using a variety of communication methods.

DURING THE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Challenge	Resolving conflict between or within partners and communities
Consequence	Unresolved conflict can jeopardise relationships and outcomes in any engagement. Participants can withdraw or become less active. Conflict can disrupt or prevent the continuation of the engagement.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be aware that individuals, groups and organisations can have different perspectives and competing interests. • Include a variety of mechanisms for people to express their views. Consider one-on-one opportunities, as well as small and larger group settings. • Be aware that there may be a history of conflict or trauma between and within individuals, groups, organisations and communities. • Be aware that any partner or stakeholder involved in the process may be under stress for a range of reasons, and that this may affect their engagement. • Develop a conflict resolution process early in the project and involve the community and the partners in designing and agreeing to that process. • Agree whether consensus is required or if it is possible to accommodate a range of views within the engagement. • Consider that conflict does not have to be negative, but a sign that something has to change. • Explore issues of difference and divergence to identify common values and work through next steps from these. • Consider obtaining independent mediation or conflict resolution support if needed. • Consider offering collaborative practice, non-violent communication or conflict resolution training to build everyone's knowledge and skills early in the project. • Consider offering an easily accessible complaints response mechanism that will also close the feedback loop i.e. complaint – response – action – information back to the person/ community making a complaint.

Challenge	Using time and resources wisely
Consequence	Engagement is likely to fail if time and resources are not managed well and are exhausted before the outcomes are achieved.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Implement strong project and financial management and reporting arrangements throughout the engagement. • Adhere to agreed timescales and schedules throughout the project. • Include people with the right skills and knowledge in appropriate actions and decisions. • Resolve any conflict or disagreement as early as possible. Don't allow problems to remain unresolved. • Focus on working together for the community to avoid competing or duplicating the work of other agencies, which might waste the community's valuable time and resources.

Challenge	Available skills in the community or in the partner are not adequate
Consequence	Engagement is likely to fail if the skills and expertise of the partner or the community are not adequate.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discuss and agree, between the partner and the community, the skills and expertise needed to achieve the desired outcomes. • Develop a relationship based on trust so that partners and community members are comfortable to be honest about skill gaps. • Create an environment that enables partners and community members to identify and address deficiencies in skill or expertise. • Allow time and resources to develop capability as required. • Share skills and expertise throughout the project, building one another's capability as part of the process.

Challenge	Maintaining the reputation of all involved in the process
Consequence	Future engagement is less likely if either a partner or a community gain a reputation for being difficult to work with, or for not participating in or leading effective engagement processes.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep the Community Engagement Principles at the forefront of all decision-making and action. <i>(see Community Engagement for Disaster Resilience (2020))</i> • Take care with preparation and delivery of community messages, media statements and any external messages or communications. Think about the potential reputational consequences of deciding: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • what is said • when it is said • how it is said • the medium chosen to deliver the message • who delivers the message • Invest appropriate time and resources into each stage of the community engagement process, to maximise the likelihood of success. • Integrate appropriate and regular monitoring and review measures throughout implementation to identify and address issues periodically. • Add or delete tasks, or spend longer on tasks that emerge as more complex than originally thought. • Keep a strong focus on the balance of relationship and outcomes, and work for success in both.

AFTER THE ENGAGEMENT PROCESS

Challenge	Sustaining good outcomes for the community after partners leave
Consequence	Effort throughout engagement will be wasted if outcomes are not achieved and sustained after the partners leave a project or the process concludes.
Actions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Invest appropriate time and resources into each stage of the community engagement process or project. • Plan and agree to timing and methods for how the partner or community will leave the engagement process, how the process will conclude or continue in another form. • Identify sources of long-term support for the project if appropriate. Build these into the planning for the engagement process. • Integrate ongoing monitoring and review of the plan, the process of engagement and outcomes. • Facilitate agreement between partners, the community and other relevant stakeholders, on maintaining the outcomes, or supporting any subsequent projects as part of ongoing community life (e.g. by having a community group or organisation continue the work if agreed and appropriate).



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