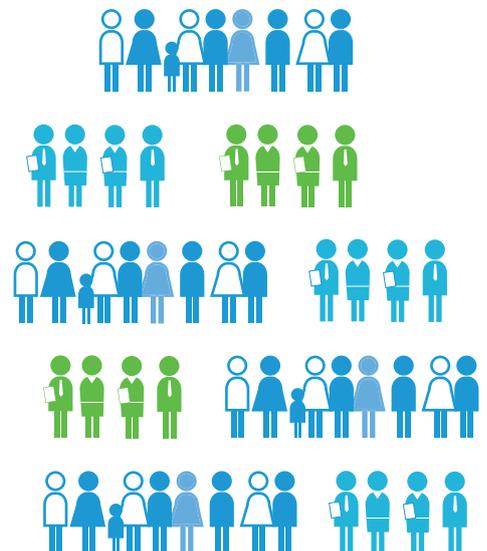


Public engagement, not just about the public

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involve

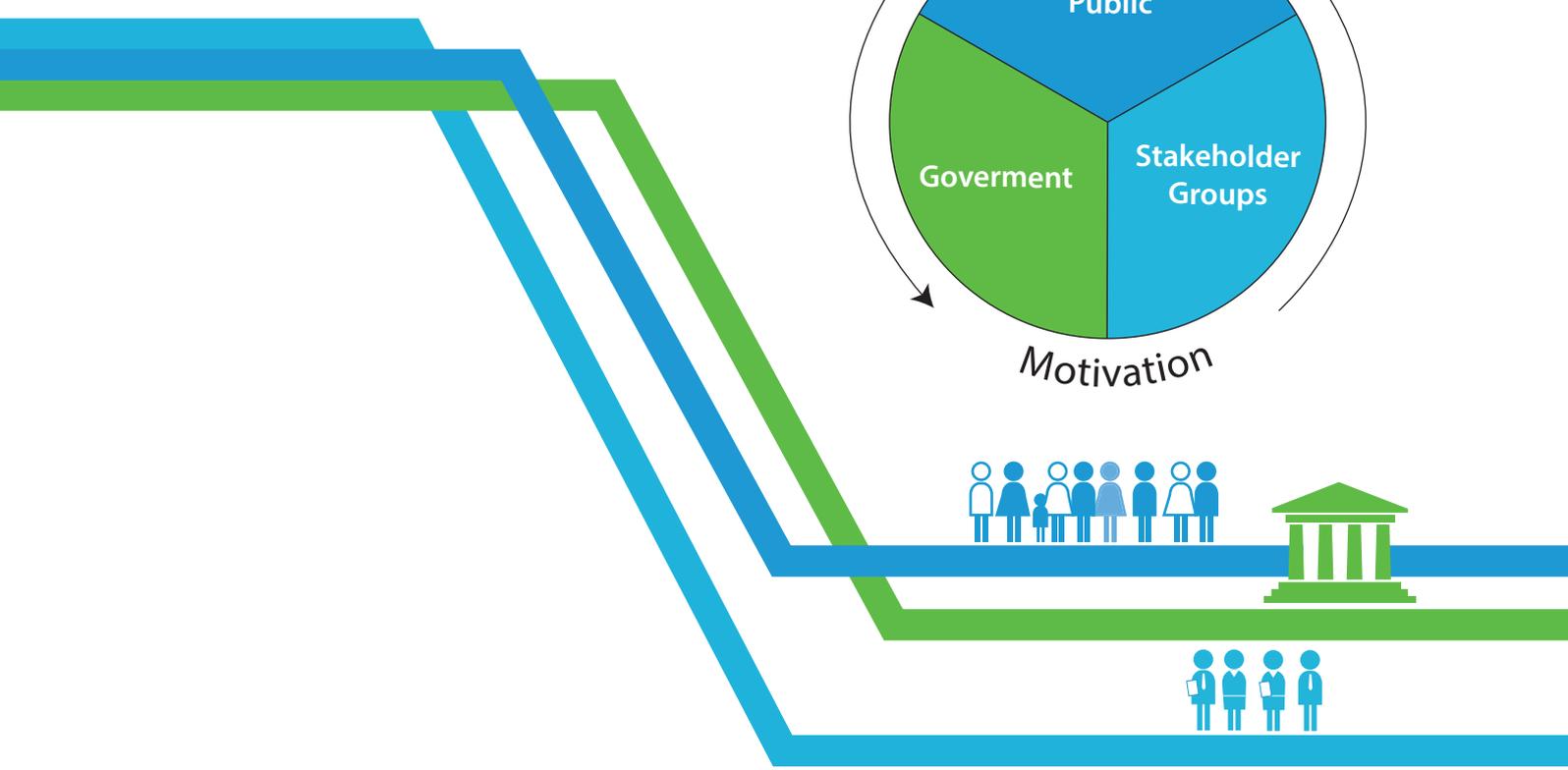
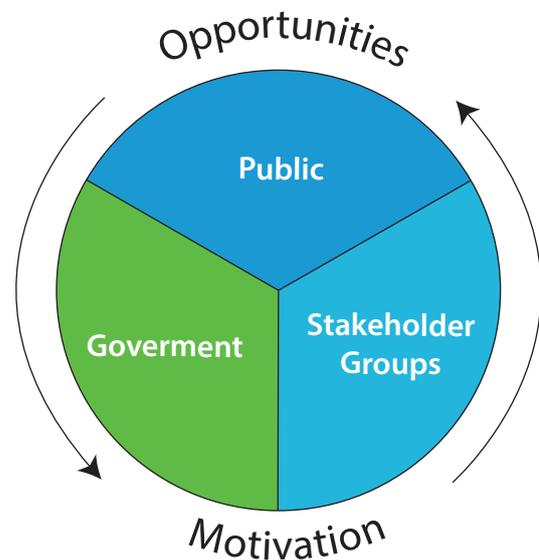
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INTRODUCTION

The engagement of the public is just one aspect of effective public engagement; the commitment and support of government officials and relevant stakeholder groups are also critically important to its long-term success.

Opportunities for engagement are ineffective or even harmful where the public, government and stakeholder groups do not share strong motivations to participate or acknowledge a process. The need for broad support means paying equal attention to the motivations and experiences of each group. Experiences with engagement and the expectations for its consequences build on each other over time to support or undermine chances for public engagement to become a sustainable part of government.

The design and implementation of public involvement process can help support or undermine broad support for public engagement. This briefing paper synthesises existing research on what motivates each group to engage and provides an overview of the specific elements of the design and implementation of engagement that can shape these motivations in the long term.

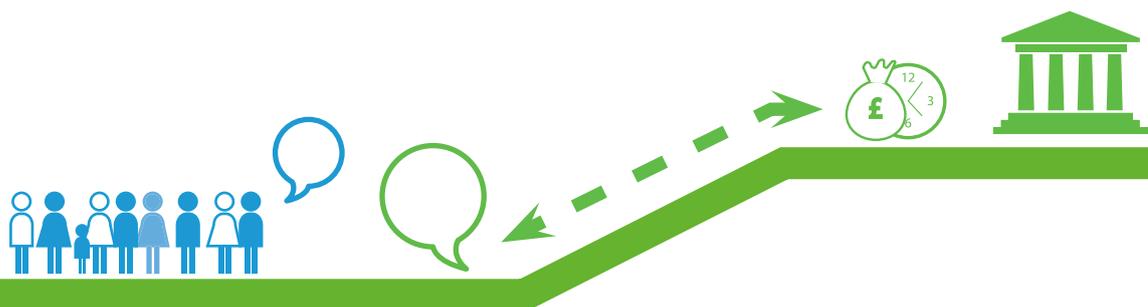


MOTIVATIONS for engagement

Government incentives

The motivations and abilities of policymakers and government officials to open up meaningful opportunities for public involvement are based on expectations about working with the public and the availability of appropriate financial and technical resources:

- **Belief in the public as a communication and decision-making partner** – When asked, many government officials will say that they consider public involvement to be “important”, but are nervous about opening up the process. Previous experiences with dysfunctional public meetings can make government as sceptical of the public as a cynical public is of government. Sustainable engagement requires building policy-makers’ trust in the public.¹
- **Expectations about the benefits of public engagement** – Benefits may include public buy-in and easier implementation of policy or more creative or efficient policymaking. While advocacy and research organisations work to educate policymakers about the merits and challenges of engagement,² direct experience with public engagement is important to reinforce or undermine expectations about the consequences of public involvement.
- **Resources** – Time, money, and expertise are necessary to deliver high quality public engagement. Effective recruitment requires surprising amounts of time and/or money to generate adequate and inclusive participation. Running an engagement process that satisfies the expectations of members of the public requires technical and creative resources as well as materials and staff time.³ Officials who are committed to the value and feasibility of meaningful engagement should be wary of involving the public without adequate resources to support implementation.



1. William Barnes and Bonnie Mann (2010) Making Local Democracy Work: Municipal Officials’ Views of Public Participation, Washington, D.C.: National League of Cities; W. Barnett Pearce and Kimberly K. Pearce (2010), Aligning the work of government to strengthen the work of citizens: A study of public administrators in local and regional government, Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation.

2. See for example the joint research and advocacy work done by organisations like the Kettering Foundation (kettering.org), Involve (involve.org.uk), the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (www.deliberative-democracy.net). All websites accessed 2 April 2014.

3. Pearce and Pearce; Lowndes, Vivien, Lawrence Pratchett, and Gerry Stoker (2001), “Trends in public participation: part 1—local government perspectives,” Public Administration 79.1, pp. 205-222.

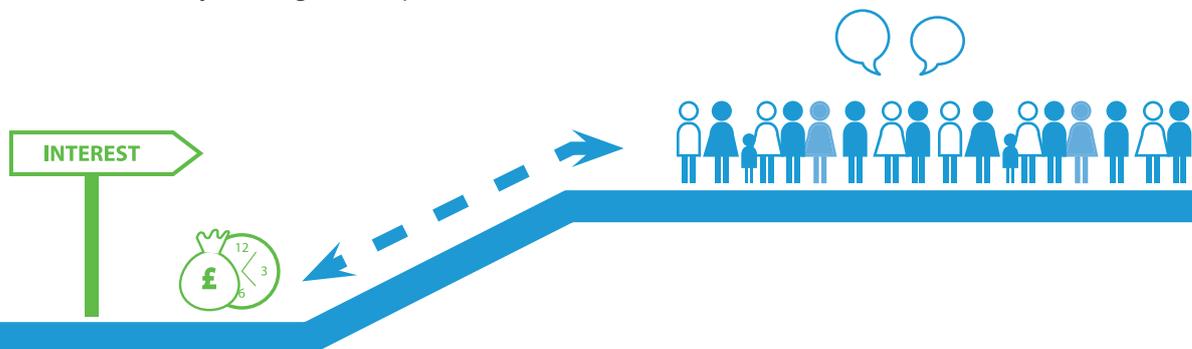
Public incentives

Reflecting the tendency to focus on the public in public engagement, there has been extensive research around what creates active citizenship, including Involve's own Pathways through Participation project.⁴ Several aspects of the public motivation to participate have been consistently identified in this work:

- **Sense of efficacy** – The expectation that an individual can have an effective impact on outcomes matters, in relation to a specific process and in the political system in general.⁵
- **Resources** – these can involve either financial resources (i.e. having sufficient financial stability to enable voluntary participation), or social relationships that allow an individual to receive invitations to participate and general collective support to attend.⁶
- **Invitation to participate**⁷ – it is easy to forget that even the most interested individuals will not be able to participate without an invitation. Different people may need to be invited through different channels in order to see or take seriously this invitation.
- **Interest** – As Pathways through Participation

documented, there must be an interest basis for members of the public to actually want to become involved. These intrinsic motivations come in a variety of forms, more or less open to influence by those organising a process:

1. Direct interest in the outcome being influenced by the process
2. General interest in attending public meetings or community events
3. Interest in learning more about their community or others' views
4. An event is expected to be fun or entertaining (interactive, games, performers, food, competitions, etc.)



4 Brady, Henry E., Sidney Verba, and Kay Lehman Schlozman (1995), "Beyond SES: A resource model of political participation," *American Political Science Review* 89. 2, pp. 271-294. Parry, Geraint, George Moyser, and Neil Day (1992), *Political Participation and Democracy in Britain*. Cambridge University Press. Hansard Society Audit of Political Engagement project, <http://www.hansardsociety.org.uk/research/public-attitudes/audit-of-political-engagement>. Involve, IVR and NCVO's Pathways through Participation project: <http://pathwaysthroughparticipation.org.uk>. All websites accessed 4 April 2014.

5 See also Finkel, Steven E. (1985), "Reciprocal effects of participation and political efficacy: A panel analysis." *American Journal of Political Science*, pp 891-913; Gastil, John, and Michael Xenos (2010). "Of attitudes and engagement: Clarifying the reciprocal relationship between civic attitudes and political participation." *Journal of Communication* 60.2, pp. 318-343.

6 See also Brady, Verba and Schlozman.

7 Pattie, Charles, Patrick Seyd, and Paul Whiteley. "Citizenship and civic engagement: Attitudes and behaviour in Britain." *Political Studies* 51.3 (2003): 443-468.

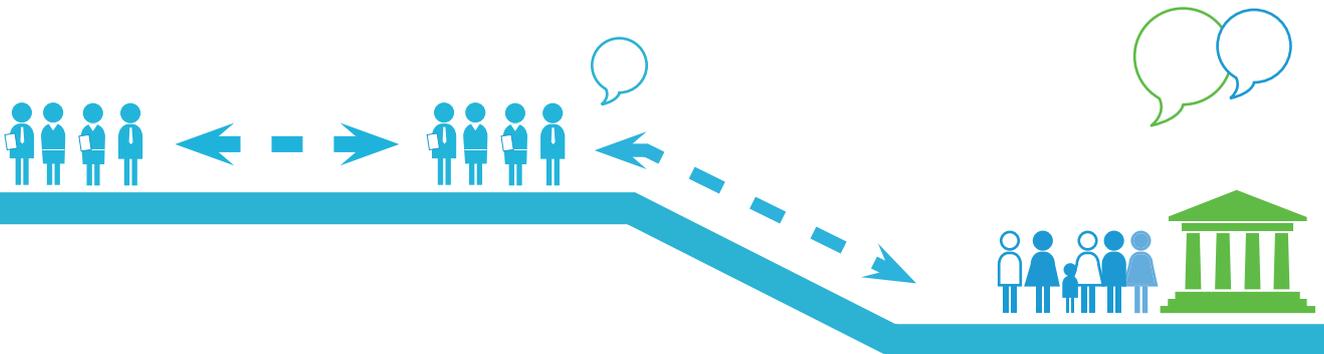
Stakeholder incentives

The reasons for organised stakeholders or civil society groups to participate overlap with those of the general public. If there is no expectation of impact, participation is unlikely. Organisations or stakeholder representatives must have resources to spare and receive an effectively targeted invitation. Real interest in the subject of the engagement process matters for stakeholders; the group must actually understand themselves to have a stake in this outcome.⁸

Civil society or stakeholder groups also have specific interests that affect their willingness to participate. These concerns emerge from organisational interests: how does their involvement further the group's goals? While other idiosyncratic motivations may exist, following are some fundamental factors that may help determine stakeholders' willingness to participate:

- **Recruitment & publicity:** does their involvement in the process provide opportunities to recruit more members or to effectively advertise the organisation's activities?
- **Networking:** does involvement provide opportunities for increased network connections or opportunities for collaboration with other groups with common interests?
- **Strategic learning:** does involvement provide

opportunities for further learning or better understanding of opportunities for the group to pursue their interests, or allowing for learning about preferences or possible allies within government or other powerful bodies?



⁸ For a good overview of stakeholder motivations, see Ansell, Chris, and Alison Gash. "Collaborative governance in theory and practice." *Journal of public administration research and theory* 18.4 (2008): 543-571. See also Wesselink, Anna, Jouni Paavola, Oliver Fritsch, and Ortwin Renn (2011). "Rationales for public participation in environmental policy and governance: practitioners' perspectives." *Environment and Planning A*, 43. 11, pp. 2688-2704.

IMPLICATIONS for Engagement design

At the heart of generating sustainable engagement is paying attention to how experiences with engagement can feed back positively to strengthen these different motivations. The design and evaluation of a process must give equal attention to the experiences of all three relevant groups, policy-makers, public, and organised stakeholders. Evaluations of public engagement often prioritise the experiences of members of the public. Their perspective is important, but it cannot be the only focus. If organised stakeholders or policymakers do not understand public engagement as something that supports their own work, they may not provide genuine buy-in or support in the future. In some cases they may even build alternate or informal channels to bypass public processes perceived to be burdensome or unproductive.

Within this general framework and bearing in mind the different motivations of the sets of actors involved in public engagement, I suggest several issues to be considered in the implementation of any process for public engagement:

1) Purpose of engagement

A clear purpose is important to building sustainable engagement as well as to shaping the design of individual processes. This objective needs to be clear to potential participants prior to the event. Generic phrasing like ‘Have your say on...’ is too vague for people to understand how their participation will matter and makes it harder for them to know if they would like to join.

- Clear communication of the purpose and scope of a public event minimises confusion and cynicism. Members of the public can be alienated by being asked to make a decision at a meeting that they were expecting to be simply informational, while expecting to influence a decision and merely being informed or invited to share comments can be disappointing.
- Developing a clear understanding of the purpose of engagement events can help government officials and policymakers build a specific case for engagement, as well as minimizing the frustration and confusion within government as well as the public.
- Making the purpose publicly clear can also help build sustainable engagement by allowing stakeholder groups to integrate new engagement opportunities into their existing strategies.



9 Several frameworks for shaping design to fit the purpose exist; one of the most dominant is the IAP2 Spectrum of Public Participation (available from the IAP2 website at www.iap2.org).

2) Recruitment and outreach

This is fundamentally important. Outreach and recruitment should be properly resourced, inclusive, and attentive to the cultural context and expectations of the targeted communities. Good outreach has long-term consequences beyond the quality of the discussion or conclusion of a single event.

- Visible, extensive recruitment and outreach is a signal of government commitment to engagement, and can reinforce a sense of efficacy in members of the public that can support active participation in future events. If this is not an open public event, the selection and recruitment process for participants should be transparent to observers.
 - Effective outreach can also have a significant impact on government staff and policymakers by demonstrating the willingness and capacity of the public to get involved, undermining the belief that no one is interested in attending public events except the few 'usual suspects'.
 - When possible, work with existing stakeholder groups. While care must be taken to not recruit exclusively through established groups, including groups as partners in outreach can ensure they also see the process as inclusive and feel they have a stake in it.
- Finally, participants should be supported in publicising or talking about what they have been doing – people who have had a good experience with participation can become powerful advocates.

3) Opportunities for interaction

The opportunities for interaction created by the structure of the event are also very important to consider. Interaction offers different benefits to each group, public, government, and stakeholders:

- Creating opportunities for interaction among members of the public may establish more sustainable patterns of engagement. A common reason given for why the people come out to an event is to get to know their neighbours or others with similar concerns.
- Government officials often operate in bureaucratic contexts where unstructured interaction with the public is a rarity. Opportunities for interaction as equals could let them learn about public priorities and community resources with less confrontation or defensiveness.
- Build in opportunities for organised stakeholder groups to increase their networks or base of members/volunteers. Are there ways to fit this into some part of this event, for example having a marketplace setting before or after where organisations could do this work?



4) Explanation of contexts

Find creative ways to allow for learning across groups about the constraints under which the others operate.

- This education can help to increase knowledge in the public and stakeholder groups about the real constraints on government officials. Real knowledge of what can and cannot be done in government can help them to effectively target their own activities, manage expectations, and even identify opportunities for collaboration or to draw on the public's capacities to create political space to act on different priorities.
- Better understanding of the each other's contexts can also help government officials to understand opportunities and barriers to the public's cooperation or collaboration in governance. They may also become more open to inviting members of the public into policymaking as public and stakeholder groups develop more accurate expectations about the authority available to government officials and policymakers.

5) Evaluation and monitoring

It is hard to overstate the importance of following up after an event or during a continuing process. The impact participants have had must be visible if their willingness to engage is to be sustained.

- Acting on public or stakeholder input has more impact if participants know it has happened. Simply listing outcomes on a website or in government offices is insufficient. Proactive communication of outcomes back to participants is crucial. If contact details of participants are collected, use them. This follow-up is key to building engagement from one (well-run) event to another.
- An open debrief or evaluation can help government officials to clarify their understanding of the value of engagement. Evaluation may identify ineffective engagement in the short-term, but can promote learning to maximize instances of effective engagement over the long-term.



CONCLUSIONS for sustainable engagement

There is no single solution to the challenge of building sustainable engagement. At the core of this work is a long-term perspective, considering how every individual opportunity to engage could best be designed to reinforce future motivations to engage. While many of these recommendations reflect established tenets of best practice in engagement, an orientation to sustainability shifts the core focus of design and evaluation. Sustainable engagement requires thinking about and designing engagement process that work effectively for all relevant parties, including government officials and organised stakeholder groups.

