

## Thoughts on Meaningful Engagement from an NGO perspective

By Becky Himlin, November 2009 (published in Planact Annual Report, prepared for Meaningful Engagement Workshop, CALS, July 2009)

The concept of 'meaningful engagement' is actually at the heart of what NGOs like Planact are working to achieve, and yet it is an elusive concept, perhaps one that is under-appreciated in a society in which is under pressure for the quick fix in the face of serious delivery challenges and under-development. It is often easiest to identify by its absence, but what goes into making its presence possible? One thing for certain, there is no set formula, no handbook, no technical solution that can guarantee results in the area of meaningful engagement and there is a wide spectrum of possible circumstances that might be considered to fit the description. Fundamentally, it's about human communication, as difficult and coded and messy a business as any you can think of. And then layer that with the imperatives of creating a democratic society, which starting point is the belief in self-determination-- that we all have the right to influence the decisions that affect our lives, that we all have the responsibility to contribute to the development of a society in which all can realize their potential.

So let's first think about the question, when does the need for 'engagement' arise, where engagement is defined as direct interaction between citizens and their government? Apart from elections, in which the government is constituted, the next obvious choice is in the formulation of policies, plans and programmes that will influence the decisions that are made and the opportunities that are created for improvements in the way society functions. But when does 'engagement' actually often arise? ....In the context of contestation or conflict about decisions that have been made that are perceived by a particular group to negatively affect their opportunities, aspirations, and even means for survival. Whereas the first circumstance may appear somewhat removed from the daily lives and experiences of most people, the second is a case where the crisis is evident and demands a resolution.

But is a situation of conflict the best circumstance in which meaningful engagement can be achieved? Why weren't people interested when the government was drawing up their plans and filing notices for public comment? Why are they objecting now that they find that the logical conclusion to those plans puts them at a disadvantage? How can they suddenly expect government to go back to the drawing board and make a renewed effort to involve them in decision-making? And doesn't government have the final authority, anyway, and the responsibility for doing what's best in the 'public interest' ?

These kinds of questions commonly characterize defensive reactions by decision-makers when it is apparent that engagement has NOT been meaningful, though it must be acknowledged that at times difficult decisions are necessary. But to begin to think of engagement in positive terms, as a starting point, it may be useful to frame a certain set of principles or an orientation that may be helpful in creating the conditions for meaningful engagement, at any point in which the need for engagement might arise.

1. The first principle is that, in order to be meaningful, the opportunity for engagement must always exist; communication channels must be open.

2. Engagement is not one-way communication, it is a series of conversations during which both parties need to be able to listen and endeavor to understand the points of view presented.

3. While it is difficult in a situation of conflict to facilitate a situation in which this form of engagement is immediately possible, in many cases the conflict itself can be viewed as the opportunity that ultimately makes it possible. In other words, conflict can be an integral part of an eventual solution, and *avoidance* of conflict is not what the focus should be, the focus should be on what is the conflict telling us about the issues and consequences involved, and therefore the considerations that need to be taken into account to make the best decision possible.

4. Inclusion is an important principle for meaningful engagement. If only select groups or individuals are aware of the engagement process, or certain groups are specifically excluded from it, despite the fact that the issues affect them, it cannot be said to be meaningful—or practical, as problems may occur at a later stage that subvert any agreements reached.

5. Another principle is that it is necessary for government decision-makers to anticipate the various advantages and disadvantages of a course of action for the various groups that have an interest in its outcome—in fact, it would be irresponsible not to do so; but this ‘analysis’ does not take the place of a PROCESS in which the various citizen groups are part of developing and communicating their own perspectives on the issues. Enough *time* for such a process to take place, therefore, is imperative. It is often more time consuming in the long run to neglect the importance of this process.

6. Meaningful engagement depends on access to relevant information—this, too, is not a one-way (government to community) process. Much of a process of engagement is actually concerned with establishing an information base about the factors and conditions that should or could affect the decision, and communities and citizens often have relevant information that would otherwise not come to light. It is also important that the relevant information is transparently available to all involved.

7. Meaningful engagement requires that it must be possible for affected citizens to influence a decision, even after it is already technically ‘made,’ particularly if the engagement leading to the decision has NOT been meaningful as so far defined. The correct orientation to parties involved in meaningful engagement is that alternatives are always possible.

8. For engagement to be meaningful, it needs to be effectively channeled to those parties that CAN actually make decisions on the issue. Nothing is more de-motivating (for ALL parties involved) than wasting time on a process of engagement where no one is able to take responsibility for making things happen.

What does all this have to do with an NGO?

A community facilitator, of the kind of that Planact endeavors to produce, is exactly the ingredient that can help create the conditions for meaningful engagement. A third party that does not have a direct interest in the outcome, but which is guided by principles and practices such as those described above, as well as experienced in facilitating processes of engagement at community

level, can be the difference that makes the process of engagement between communities and government meaningful or not.

However, the community facilitator must also be clear about his or her role and honest about the biases that they bring to the process—no one is entirely neutral or ‘objective’ but that does not diminish the important role that the skilled facilitator can play in supporting a process of communication that can lead to a solution or plan of action that gains widespread support. It is also true that such a facilitator may NOT be appropriate in all cases. But where it may make a difference, a critical factor in that success is the extent to which the facilitator can make space for reflection by the various parties about what has happened and why it is happening, what the quality of the participation has been and what has influenced it, and what is required in order to correct or enhance a process of engagement. In other words, TALK about the process in a directed way.

Planact is involved in just such a process in some of the sites in which its community facilitators are involved, which is informed by the principles of *action research*. We felt it was necessary to become more *conscious and explicit* about what the various views or interpretations of actions or events have been, particularly as they affect the quality of participation, and to individually and collectively discuss these and determine what these mean for a future course of action. The process thus far (which has taken place in a period of less than a year), has yielded information and perspectives that could otherwise have remained hidden, and has directly influenced how Planact has interacted with the communities concerned. In addition to this action research, several case studies focusing on participation, where Planact is not involved, are being undertaken. We hope to share the results of this process, which is being extensively documented, to make a contribution to knowledge on this contentious issue of just what constitutes meaningful engagement.