

Environmental Justice Symposium - World Café (27 July 2012)

Topic 3 - What is meaningful and genuine participation?

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Discussion points

1. The consultation process for the Murray Darling Basin Plan was raised as a formal consultation process that fell short, and as an example of a process that has been overrun by interests with large financial backing.
2. Councils and State Government must be required by law to ensure that disadvantaged and vulnerable communities are sought out and involved in decision-making processes.
3. As part of this requirement, decision-makers should formally advise the community as to how their input influenced the decision and affected the outcome.
4. Access to information must form the basis for empowering communities. Governments must be legally required to have information accessible.
5. Timeframes for consultation need to take into consideration the competing demands of community volunteers. The following considerations should be made when deciding on consultation:
 - a. The technical complexity of an activity or project and the communities ability to understand issues
 - b. The ability of the community to understand the submission process
 - c. There should be multiple ways in which communities can input into a process, not just through written submissions.
6. When disseminating information in an emergency or around a sensitive project, governments must make sure this is delivered via a broad range of methods. For example, an information flyer is often insufficient, and genuine education is needed for empowerment of disadvantaged and vulnerable communities.
7. Communities are often experts in the issues that impact on them and on their neighbourhoods, and they should be treated accordingly. Governments do not respect the community and do not hold their views in high regard. They instead position themselves as experts and bring in consultants as experts, which displaces the community from the process. Governments need to respect the expertise of communities and seek it out so as to genuinely empower them.
8. Suggestion to develop a Charter of Environmental Justice. This could require environmental justice assessments as part of, for example, Environmental Impact Assessment processes. This could also enshrine rights to know, participate and have sufficient notice of plans activities and developments.
9. There was a consensus in the group that Government generally doesn't want genuine participation, so there is a need to build a social movement and mandate that demands that Governments genuinely include people in decision-making processes.
10. Genuine participation means that the community must be offered more than 'consultation' – they want to meaningfully participate and negotiate.
11. Local government needs more support to properly empower their communities to participate. There also must be an increase in the opportunities for people to physically access government (for example, an increased number of rural and regional offices).