Aboriginal Disaster Resilience Planning Guide Resources

Working Together
Holding Community Meetings

Holding Community Meetings

Advertising, organizing, conducting and recording the outcome of community meetings can be a challenging, yet rewarding experience. The process of completing a disaster resilience plan is strongly aided by community-based meetings and consultation with as many local residents and organizations to ensure the broadest possible participation from the community in the process.

You may want to consider the resources provided here for conducting community meetings, including information regarding:

a) promoting the meeting;
b) participant roles;
c) materials and equipment;
d) creating meeting agendas;
e) process development;
f) facilitation techniques; and
g) recording techniques.

Gaining Community Buy-in

Holding Community Meetings

Who should attend?

Everyone should be invited to the community meeting. More community members attending will ensure that more and better information will be gathered. On the other hand, broad community participation will mean some facilitation exercises may not be workable. It is important to have a representative cross-section of the community in attendance. Ideally, there should be a balanced representation based on gender, age (youth, young and older adults, Elders), ethnic backgrounds and income levels. As a team, spend some time identifying the major decision-makers, formal and informal leaders, Elders, members of the fire department, other essential service providers, business owners, club and society members, long-term residents and newcomers.

How will you get the word out?

Use a variety of methods to publicize the meeting:

- Posters in high-traffic locations
- Notices in the local newspaper or newsletter
- Phone calls, especially to residents with broad knowledge of the community
- Word of mouth
- Inclusion on the agenda of regular meetings of local organizations (e.g., community government, recreation committee, Housing Authority, Rotary Club) and discuss the upcoming meeting and location
- Send a notice to schools

Be sure to include the meeting purpose, place and time in any notices. If it is possible to serve refreshments at the meeting, include this information as well. If it fits your community's culture, consider having a pot luck meal to start the meeting. Brainstorm other ways to attract greater community engagement in these meetings.

When should the meeting be held?

Community meetings should not be longer than 4 hours. Most people cannot dedicate more time. Ask people, especially those who are identified as key stakeholders, what day and time will work best for them for scheduling the meeting.

Where to hold the meeting?

The meeting should be held in a central location, such as a community hall or other community meeting place. The meeting room should be large enough to accommodate the expected turnout with enough wall space to accommodate flipchart pages if it is decided to use them.

What materials and equipment should be on hand?

Although different materials may be needed for different community meetings, the following will be useful in all meetings:

- 1-2 flipcharts, with paper pads
- Flipchart markers
- Meeting agenda on flipchart paper and in a handout
- Blank paper for participants
- Pens/pencils for participants (Sharpies if possible)
- Copies of the materials specific to the workshop

How should the room be set up?

Round or square tables are best. Each table should seat 6-8 participants. Decide what you will use as the "front" of the room (not too close to the doors), and set up a small facilitator's table with 1-2 chairs, and the flipcharts. On each table put enough paper, pens/pencils for the number of chairs. If possible, have water at the tables.

- The facilitator table should have flipchart markers, paper and pen/pencils
- If the meeting calls for flipcharts, have them set up around the room either on easels or the walls. Don't forget to include the agenda

Setting the agenda

Each meeting should have a pre-set agenda, outlining the meeting schedule. It should include the topics to be addressed during the meeting. This can be very brief, or detailed, depending on your audience and the purpose of the meeting. You don't need to provide timings for the agenda, but you should be clear in your own mind how much time should be spent on each agenda item.

Report writing

After the meeting, the recorder should reproduce meeting notes and flipchart notes as a Meeting Summary, and distribute to all participants. Include a brief Session Summary, with major highlights and decisions, in the Meeting Summary as well as any local newspaper or newsletter.

Guidelines for Facilitators

Spend time with the meeting recorder prior to the start of each session to ensure you are both clear on what will be discussed and what questions will be asked. When participants come to the table you are moderating, make them feel welcome and introduce yourself and the recorder. Ask each person to introduce themselves to each other.

Before you begin the working session, encourage participants at the table to write and draw key ideas on paper so they can engage in the conversation. This can be used to assist individuals recall important ideas. Introduce the issue or question you want the participants to address. Ask participants to share their main ideas and questions they may have on the topic being discussed. Encourage participants to build on the ideas that are offered by others. Encourage all participants to contribute or say something. As the discussion is winding down, ask each participant to consider what has been the most important to them over the course of the discussion and to share that thought. Work with the recorder to ensure that everyone's important thoughts have been captured.

Role

- Facilitate the discussion to ensure that everyone has a voice.
- Don't allow anyone to monopolize the conversations.
- Guide the discussion (as opposed to lead).
- Remember you are a guide/facilitator not a participant.

Dealing with People Who Don't Say Much

Ask questions in such a way that you draw out what a quieter individual has to say. Drawing people out sends out a message – "I'm with you; I understand you so far. Now tell me a little more." Once someone makes a comment or contributes an idea or thought, they will become comfortable in participating in discussions. Here are some examples of how you can ask questions to get more information:

- "Can you say more about that?"
- "What do you mean by…?"
- "Can you give me an example?"
- "How is that working for you?"
- "What matters to you about that?"
- "Tell me more."
- "How so?"

Dealing with People Who Won't Stop Talking

There are often situations when one person takes over the conversation and doesn't allow others to say what they have to offer. One solution is to focus on those who are not speaking and encourage those who are not participating to participate more – rather than to try to discourage those who are over-participating. Another solution is to ask everyone to pause and think about what's important to them at this point of the conversation. Then ask them to write down their most important point. Afterwards ask each person in turn to read out their idea and provide time for the group to respond before you move on to the next person.

People are Not Playing Attention

One answer is to simply give people a break. Not just a five minute break but give them time to refocus on the issues. Often you will find that people have more energy after a break. Another solution is to address the situation directly – "I notice that as a group we are having difficulty focusing on the topic. Is there something we could be doing differently to help us get back on topic?"

People are Interrupting Each Other and Are Not Listening

If you notice this is occurring, "stacking" is a one way to manage the group. Stacking is determining an order for people to speak. Ask for a show of hands to recognize who will have the floor. As hands go up, look at the first person and make eye contact, and give them the floor. Then make eye contact with the second person, and give them the floor. Continue in this way until everyone whose hand is up has been acknowledged. If it is a large group you may need to write down the order of speakers. Then as each person finishes speaking, go to the next speaker. This way everyone will know that they will have a chance to say what's on their minds and they can listen to what's being said.

If You're Running out of Time after a Break

There are two possible options:

- Start on time – those who come back late will just miss out. Hopefully they will realize that they are missing out on the conversation and will come back on time next time.
- Wait for everyone to come back from the break – waiting for everyone sends the message that if one person is late they can waste a lot of people's time. Hopefully the latecomers will get the message.

If the problem continues, when everyone is back and before the next break, ask the group – "I realize that I might not be leaving enough time for the breaks – what would you suggest for a time for a break so that we can have everyone back on time?" Then follow the group's suggestion.

If People Get Into an Argument

One strategy is to take advantage of a quick pause in the argument and say, "these are both good points, let's see who else has an opinion on this issue?" and then turn to the group to hear what others have to say. Another method to deal with this is to say, "Before we go too much further with this issue, are there any other issues that we need to discuss?" Avoid focusing on those who are over-participating and instead focus on those who are left out the discussion.

Working with Groups

Most of the time when working with groups, facilitators use small group discussion formats. Open discussions begin with the facilitator presenting the issue or asking a question. At this point, someone starts the discussion and then others respond and the process continues. When the time for discussion has ended, if there are several small groups, each group is asked to present one or more of their most important points to the other groups. This format can work very well but it can also present some challenges for the facilitator (see the next section). There are some other ways of working with groups which can encourage people to participate. The following are examples which may be helpful – don't be afraid to try out new ideas!

Round Robin

In a round robin, ensure everyone can see all participants. Give a one sentence overview of the topic to be discussed. Then explain, “We’ll go clockwise from whoever speaks first. While someone is talking, no one may interrupt. When a participant has finished speaking, they should say “I’m done,” so the next person knows when they can speak. Repeat the one sentence overview of the topic and wait for someone to speak first. Be aware of the time you have. You can set time limits (“This will work best if each participant spends about one minute sharing their reactions.”) or leave it open-ended (“Take as much time as you need to give us your thoughts on the topic.”). You can also decide whether or not to let someone pass without saying anything.

Some variations that can be considered are:

- Instead of going around the group clock-wise you can provide the first speaker with a small beanbag and after they are finished speaking they can throw the beanbag to whoever they want as long as the person has not yet spoken on the topic.
- Based on a First Nations’ tradition, you can provide a “talking stick.” No one can talk except the person who holds the talking stick. When they have finished talking they pass on the stick to someone else.

Working in Pairs

Give a one sentence overview of the topic to be discussed. Then explain, “Turn to the person next to you and then discuss the topic with your partner.” One person will be the “talker” and the other the “listener.” After five minutes (or however long you wish), I will make an announcement and you will switch roles. After five minutes I will let you know that time is up and I would like you to come back to the main group.” When people come back to the group, ask a few people to share their thoughts and what they learned.

Some variations that can be considered are:

- You can ask people to form groups of three instead of meeting in pairs.
- After each person has been a “talker”, ask them to come up with their two “top” ideas. Then ask them to pair up with another couple and share their top ideas with the other couple.

Fishbowl

This can be effective if you wish to build understanding among people whose backgrounds or experience are different. This will work best if there are only two or three different groups of participants. Introduce the fishbowl by stating “This activity will help you better understand each other’s priorities and challenges without becoming hindered by long debates.” Then invite one of the stakeholder groups (e.g., firefighters, community planners) to sit in a small circle. Invite the others to organize their chairs in a circle around the first group (so that the first group is in a “fishbowl”). Then present a one sentence overview of the topic to discuss. The group in the fishbowl discusses the topic amongst themselves and the others listen to the conversation without speaking. When the conversation is completed (set a time limit), ask everyone to make a comment and/or ask questions on what they heard. Ask those who were in the fishbowl to report on how it felt or how they gained from the experience. Then bring another group into the “fishbowl” and repeat the process.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming is an effective means of getting people to find new solutions to problems or to consider why certain problems are occurring. Brainstorming can help people contribute concerns, identify helpful people and resources, and consider lessons learned from the past.

There are three main rules for brainstorming:

- Everyone’s contribution is worthwhile
    - Even weird or way-out ideas

    - Even confusing ideas
    - Especially silly ideas
- Don't criticize or evaluate someone else's ideas
    - We should feel free to say what we want
    - We will accept anyone's ideas without judging whether it is a good or bad idea
- The rules can't be changed once you have started

As a facilitator it is important that you do not judge other people's ideas as they are written down – for example, don't say "Good idea" or "Dumb idea" – accept each idea as it is. Don't frown or smile to show that you don't or do like an idea. Be neutral.

- Make sure that you set a time limit.
- Don't rush or pressure people to respond. If people are quiet and not quick to make suggestions it usually means they are thinking.
- Do move around to hold people's attention and boost people's energy.
- Do encourage a second burst of creative ideas after the obvious ones have all been stated.

After the brainstorming session has ended you will have lots of ideas. Now what do you do with them? There are many different ways to move forward.

One way is to count the number of ideas that have been suggested and divide that number by three. Each person then gets that number of sticky "dots" to vote for their top choices. For example, if there were 30 ideas, everyone would get 30/3 or 10 "dots." The top ten items will be selected for further discussion.

Another way is to give everyone three, four or five sticky "dots." Each person can place their dots on whichever ideas they would most like to discuss further. They can place all of their dots on one choice, or place one dot on each of their choices. The items that receive the majority of the group's vote will be discussed further.

Guidelines for Recorders

Meet with your facilitator prior to the start of each session and ensure you are both clear on the process; what will be discussed and what questions will be asked. Make sure that important ideas are recorded on the flip chart. It is this record that allows the group's work to be shared with others, and to serve as a guide to future planning action. Do not be afraid to use colour, graphics, and creative ways to document the key points. As you are recording, be sure to check back with participants to ensure your notes accurately reflect what they wanted to say.

Role

Typical roles for a recorder include:

- Writing down key or important ideas on flip chart paper
- Helping participants to use post-it notes or other materials to record their thoughts
- Keeping track of and labeling flip chart paper that has been used to record information
    - Please mark each sheet with your initials, the title (e.g., 1st Question), and the page #
    - At the end of each session please collect all flip chart paper used and give it to the person in charge of the session

Here are some pointers for ensuring people can read your notes on the flipcharts and keep people's mind on new ideas and thoughts, rather than worrying about remembering something that was said.

- Print in LARGE CAPITAL LETTERS using thick lines.
- Letters should be at least 1 inch or 2.5 centimetres in height.
- Leave margins on all sides of the paper.
- Don't indent.
- Don't crowd the bottom of a page – start a new page.

- Write straight up and down rather than *slanted*.
- Use colours – blue, brown, purple and green are best.
- Avoid yellow, orange, red and pink as they are hard to see at a distance. Don't use black – it's too heavy a colour.
- Switch colours for each new idea. Don't use different colours for headings versus text – it's too hard to remember and often headings are not appropriate.
- Use bullets for lists.
- Draw stars besides key ideas or concepts.
- Use arrows to point out relationships, use flowcharts to show time sequences.
- Use symbols (happy faces, dollar signs, etc.) to express ideas.
- Link common ideas with circles and arrows.
- Leave spaces after each idea (later you may want to go and add items to an idea).
- Make sure what you write will make sense weeks later.
- Ask people to read over what you have written. Ask for feedback and corrections. Accept corrections when they are offered.

Remember it is the group's chart – not your own!

References

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