Next Generation Engagement project

Informing community engagement for Australia’s infrastructure sector

SITUATION ANALYSIS

MAY 2017
Welcome to the Next Generation Engagement project, Australia’s largest national study into community engagement in infrastructure to date.

The breadth and influence of our project partners—to whom we are deeply grateful for their support—represents the widespread agreement that the questions we were asking ourselves were the questions others need answered too.

We are pleased to present this situational analysis as a first major step in opening an industry-wide conversation about what community engagement means for infrastructure project planning and delivery and what can be done to realise its potential. As such, this document is an opening gambit, a work-in-progress, by no means the final word. Its intention is to spark debate. We want you to question it, to pose alternatives and point out topics that you see as a priority.

This document is indebted to early conversations with our project partners, representing industry leaders, government, peak industry bodies and civil society. It incorporates years of research into stakeholder engagement, impact assessment, social risk and social licence to operate. It represents perspectives as diverse as urban planning, economics, social science, psychology, engineering and policy science.

We are excited about the potential of the Next Generation Engagement project to offer solutions to long-standing challenges by interrogating what we already know and through asking ourselves:

*How can we do community engagement better and in doing so, deliver the infrastructure we need more efficiently and with better outcomes for impacted communities?*

We are also excited about this project because it represents the research future of industry-government-civil society collaboration. Together, we will define the key questions that need answering and determine the shared outcomes to strive for.
Providing written comment and feedback on interim research findings at various points throughout the project’s pilot phase (until 20 December 2017).

Participating in conversations at national forums later this year, where we will present preliminary research results (beginning August 2017).

Contributing to the design of the next phases of the research, beginning in 2018.

By encouraging broad-based collaboration and ownership of the project from its start, we aim to reflect the very principles and values of the community engagement at the heart of this project.

Thank you for your support and we look forward to working with you to champion the next generation of community engagement for Australia.

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The University of Melbourne

Kirsty O’Connell
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Next Generation Engagement Project

The Next Generation Engagement project uses ‘co-design’, a method of research design in which researchers work closely with key stakeholders from the earliest stages of the study. You are participating in co-design right now, by reading this document and offering feedback.

We need you to share your thoughts, challenges and creative ways forward in order to shape the research priorities for the Next Generation Engagement project. You can contribute to the design of the research by:

- Actively participating in facilitated activities at the partner launch events: add to our online lists; participate in a short, video interview; take the national survey; leave comments on Delib.
- Speaking with or emailing the researchers with your ideas or questions following the partner launch events. Our team’s contact details appear on the back cover of this report and we welcome a conversation.
- Supporting representatives of your organisation to participate in the National Practitioner Workshop Series, being held in June throughout capital cities.

This document is intended to raise questions, spark debate, prompt ideas and create conversations. We encourage you to read it with critical curiosity, as you apply your own experiences and expertise to the issues raised.

Throughout the document, watch out for two icons:

Wherever you see this icon, we are posing a question we believe is critical for research. Our question to you is: Is this the right/best question? What else should we be asking?

Wherever you see this icon, we are highlighting a critical point for discussion. What do you think of this issue? Is it a critical point of tension? A lever for change? Or is there something else that is a priority?

Sparking debate and seeking your ideas

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Australia’s infrastructure

Australia’s infrastructure sector is thriving. Current estimates show more than $100 billion in infrastructure projects in development and the 2017/18 Federal budget committed $70 billion to transport infrastructure projects across Australia to 2020/21. And that’s just the public-sector projects.

The prioritisation of infrastructure is largely driven by a level of population growth that is faster than peer nations, including the United States, Canada and the UK. For Infrastructure Australia, this prioritisation is about ‘the user – the commuter waiting for the train, the family paying their electricity bill and the business looking to capitalise on overseas markets’. For Commonwealth, State and Territory Governments, a focus on infrastructure growth represents commitments made to tax payers, work to support strong future economies and efforts to ensure Australia offers a world-leading quality of life.

Australia is not alone in its strong demand for infrastructure. World-wide, population growth is driving increasing requirements for new and upgraded infrastructure, representing energy, water, transport, housing and social needs. The delivery of these needs stretches across industries as diverse as mining, oil and gas, electricity generation and transmission, water and sewerage systems, architecture, construction and urban planning, engineering, and social welfare and affordability. The McKinsey Global Institute estimates that $57 trillion is needed in global infrastructure investment between 2013 and 2030 simply to keep pace with demand.

This is even before addressing glaring gaps in asset maintenance.
Australia’s infrastructure needs and growth

The large investments required to deliver Australia’s infrastructure needs equate to big business. In 2014-15, major infrastructure industries represented 10.2% of Australia’s GDP. The importance of Australia’s infrastructure sector will continue to increase, particularly as the resources industry contracts. All Governments have expressed a desire for greater private sector participation in project funding and development and there has been a steady increase in the number of public-private partnerships (PPPs) to meet demand.

Private sector involvement in infrastructure construction has increased from less than half a percent of GDP in the late 1980s to more than 1.5% by 2015.

Industry growth and the substantial investments that come with it, however, do not mean that all projects are acceptable to Australian communities. Recent examples from around the country show that many are unhappy with the way certain projects have been planned or delivered.

From the industry perspective, social opposition contributes to increased costs and barriers to infrastructure delivery, not to mention the stresses and difficulties placed upon project staff. From communities’ perspectives, there may be dissatisfaction with the way they are being engaged in the planning and delivery of major projects. This is where the Next Generation Engagement project comes in.
Costs to industry and communities

We estimate that community opposition has contributed to the suspension, abandonment or mothballing of at least $20 billion in infrastructure projects across Australia’s East Coast alone within the past decade.6

Infrastructure delivery and community opposition is a regular subject of critical media commentary. It is also the focus of considerable industry discussion from peak national bodies, including Infrastructure Australia (IA) Infrastructure Partnerships Australia (IPA) and the Infrastructure Sustainability Council of Australia (ISCA), and among international agencies, including the World Bank and Asian Development Bank.

The costs for communities in opposition are also high but less simple to quantify.

Many of those who oppose projects do so in their own time, as volunteers working on behalf of other locals. Studies in psychology show us that oppositional relationships take a toll, in terms of increased stress levels, possible time away from paid work, reduced resilience and a sense of things happening beyond one’s control. Projects also often bear an environmental cost that can be experienced by communities as a loss of visual amenity, through lost land access or substantial changes to an environment they call home. The resulting ‘solistalgia’—a sense of distress induced by environmental change and a longing for the landscape that existed before—is very real.

To what extent do members of the public understand the nature and processes of infrastructure planning and development? Are there opportunities for earlier engagement? A different type of engagement?

How can community engagement processes activate dialogue from supporters, opponents and the silent majority?

If we ask communities for more input and give stakeholders more say, how do we ensure that their ideas and advice are incorporated into project planning and delivery in a meaningful way? At the same time, how do we ensure that Australia still gets the infrastructure it needs, rather than just the infrastructure that is popular?

Why does community engagement lag other roles in terms of its professionalisation and formalised education, including undergraduate concentrations and Masters-level qualifications?

Why do we start with best practice strategies but end up shifting to ‘declare and defend’ mode during delivery?

How can projects allow for consultation about whether or not a project should be started, not just how a project is delivered?
Global organisations, including IAP2, the International Association for Impact Assessment (IAIA), and the International Centre for Complex Project Management, provide deep expertise and training to support the engagement of stakeholders and communities. Groups like IAIA offer social scientific means of understanding impacts. The education and training programs of professional organisations like these have equipped thousands of individuals with the skills necessary to deliver successful engagement.

Research, like that of the Melbourne School of Government (MSoG) at The University of Melbourne, the University of Western Australia Business School’s Centre for Social Impact and ANU Crawford School of Public Policy, provides further in-depth insights into such relevant topics as project governance, social risk, impact identification and measurement and deliberative democratic methods.

Various government policies and regulation support the inclusion of stakeholder concerns as a regular component of project scoping, planning and delivery. For example, such considerations are enshrined in requirements for social impact assessment within each State and Territory’s environmental planning approval system for major projects.

Australia’s infrastructure sector benefits from a strong regulatory environment, solid investment and world-leading engineering. It is also the beneficiary of years of research, training and investment in community engagement. Once an ‘added extra’ or afterthought, community engagement is today a critical component of all project delivery.
Our starting point

All good research begins with a set of assumptions, the key lessons, findings and ideas that have come before it. The Next Generation Engagement project takes as its starting point that we have enough research and practice-based evidence to support effective community engagement, including:

- Choice of methods and tools
- Underpinning principles and values
- A professionalised cohort of practitioners
- Guidance and support from practice-focused organisations
- Policy guidance
- Case studies to build learning
- Good cohesion and collaboration within the community engagement profession
- Agreement among practitioners as to what strong community engagement looks like.

What we now need is:

- An improved understanding of how projects are currently impacted by community opposition and social risk, particularly in terms of budget, schedule and scope.
- Better connection between selected engagement approaches and their effectiveness in managing social risk and reducing community opposition.

What are the costs and benefits of engagement at various points and how can best return on investment in engagement be achieved, for all parties?

- Wider recognition of community engagement as a profession (supported by greater opportunities for tertiary level qualifications in this field)
- Integration of community engagement into all aspects of infrastructure planning and delivery
- Shared (sector-wide) understanding of the benefits of community engagement and when it should occur
- Understanding of which methods are best applied in what situations (e.g. aligning the type of social risk identified with a particular engagement method)
- Knowledge about the critical junctures and levers that are either hindering application of best practice community engagement or which could improve community engagement effectiveness.

How can we better demonstrate the impact of social risk and community engagement on project schedule, budget and scope? How could data be shared among projects to develop an industry-wide performance ‘baseline’ and reduce ‘research fatigue’ in communities?

What is the earliest point at which engagement is likely to be most meaningful and most effective, for all parties concerned?

- Better integration of community engagement with concept phase project planning, particularly project selection and business case development.
- Stronger linkages between community engagement and project schedules, scope and budget to demonstrate how engagement efforts affect project management.
The project does not aim to reinvent the wheel. We have a solid foundation of excellent community engagement methods and tools. The task now is to join them up with the planning and delivery process in a way that is meaningful across organisations (in-reach) and valued in planning and regulation (outreach).

We now invite our partners to discuss and identify the critical challenges, opportunities and priorities for investigation. These early ideas will be collected through our Melbourne and Sydney Partner Launch events. The ideas and feedback partners provide will be combined with findings from the National Survey to directly inform the work that we do in the upcoming National Practitioner Workshop Series. The Workshops will bring together practitioners from a variety of backgrounds to incorporate disparate and competing views. Through this process, we will distill key ideas about community engagement and pose a number of issues and questions to generate findings and inform the next, three-to-five year research plan.

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**Aims of the Next Generation Engagement Project**

The Next Generation Engagement Project aims to reduce the gap between best community engagement principles and on-ground practice.

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**RESEARCH PHASES**

1. **Phase one: National survey and desktop research** (February to May 2017)
2. **Phase two: Fieldwork Partner launch events and National Practitioner Workshop series** (May–June 2017)
3. **Phase three: Analysis, circulation of draft report and national dialogue consultation with Partners** (July–August 2017)
4. **Phase four: Final report completed, national roadshow at key industry forums to share results** (September–December 2017)

**2018:** Major funding application to support the longer-term project

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Questions:

1. Are our current methods of engagement sufficient for current and future generations? Or is it time for new methods and tools, including more online engagement or ‘gamification’?
2. How early should engagement commence and who should be engaged at each stage?
New perspectives coming soon:

Expert commentary series

Over the coming weeks, look out for our Expert Commentary Series, arriving in an inbox near you. We have invited leading research experts from diverse disciplines to share their ideas on the key challenges, trends and opportunities facing Australian infrastructure, from their own perspectives.

‘Community engagement in infrastructure: Fostering well-being and resilience’

Professor Dianne Vella-Brodrick,
Deputy Director, Centre for Positive Psychology,
The University of Melbourne

‘Impact of community engagement on sustainability outcomes’

Dr Dominique Hes, Director, THRIVE Research Hub, Melbourne School of Design, The University of Melbourne

‘Including social outcomes and risk in economic evaluations’

Dr Jodi York,
Faculty of Business and Economics, The University of Melbourne

‘Infrastructure Planning is Political: An urban planning perspective on engagement’

Dr Kate Raynor,
Transform Housing, Faculty of Architecture, Building and Planning, The University of Melbourne


6. Ibid. p.12

7. Visit The Next Generation Engagement project or add your own estimate at: http://blogs.unimelb.edu.au/nextgenengagement/


Ideas, questions or want more information?
Get in touch with our project team:
nextgen-project@unimelb.edu.au

We wish to acknowledge our research partners:
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Centre for Social Impact, UWA Business School

We are pleased to acknowledge the support of the following partners across the infrastructure sector, including:

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Infrastrucure Victoria
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AGL Energy
Westpac Banking Corporation
Melbourne Water
Lendlease
The NSW Government
The Coordinator General of Victoria
Aurecon
RPS
Infrastructure Partnerships Australia
The Infrastructure Association of Queensland
Green Building Council of Australia
Infrastructure Sustainability Council of Australia
The Australian Institute for Project Management
The International Centre for Complex Project Management

The International Association for Impact Assessment
The Public Relations Institute of Australia
IAP2 Australasia
Engage2Act
Delib Australia and UK
Temple Executive Search
Bang the Table
Infrasol Group