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Community engagement in infrastructure: Fostering well-being and resilience

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Challenges of communities in the modern era

Community change is inevitable in light of rapid technological advances, population growth, creation or expansion of infrastructure, and extreme weather conditions associated with climate change. The fate of communities, particularly those that are dependent on industry such as mining or farming for their livelihood, can be impacted by many factors including social and environmental circumstances and logistics that are often not predictable and difficult to control. Infrastructure changes such as building developments or new road works can create upheaval and heartache for families within communities who are required to, for example, relocate or adjust to heightened noise from passing traffic. Many sacrifices and adjustments are needed by community members to live through these changes.



This paper focuses on the human interface of community change related to infrastructure delivery. It draws on findings from the field of positive psychology and well-being science to underscore the need for a more deliberate and systematic strategy for including and respecting the individuals, families, workplaces and groups affected by planning decisions and infrastructure implementation. This paper examines how individuals experience community change, the individual and environmental capabilities and approaches that optimise outcomes, and the characteristics of successful partnerships relating to infrastructure change.



The impacts of change on individuals

Tensions that arise during infrastructure project delivery are escalated when the project has merit for the broader population but adversely impacts groups or individuals involved. The effects of infrastructure change will vary considerably from person to person within a community, and individual responses will therefore also differ. Researchers in a variety of fields, including positive psychology—the study of optimal functioning and flourishing (feeling good and doing good)—have turned their attention to understanding how well-being can be maintained despite hardship. Five response styles to community change have been developed based on Leonard, McCrea and Walton’s (2016) framework:

Resisting – going against the change or aspects of the change

Not coping – feeling vulnerable and lacking a sense of control

Only just coping – finding ways to put up with and manage the change

Adapting – adopting a positive approach to accommodating the change

Transforming – embracing the change to create something better than before

Leonard et al. (2016) found that the groups characterised as having adaptive and transformative capabilities in the face of community change had higher levels of community functioning, in comparison to groups with less adaptive coping styles. Community agency—the capacity of a community to act in a self-determined way towards

achieving shared goals—was found to be a critical factor related to community functioning. Individuals who can adapt to their changing landscape and are emotionally and socially skilled, will respond constructively to infrastructure changes. Research shows that communities and their support systems need to adapt to environmental risks and global challenges, be open to new ideas including infrastructure change and to be proactive and innovate. To facilitate these positive mindsets and processes, communities must draw on a range of internal and external resources including their inner strengths and their support networks. Those involved in managing infrastructure projects also have responsibilities around making the process as respectful and inclusive as possible for those involved, including those who oppose the changes. All stakeholders need to adapt if a truly successful change process is sought.

Community resilience and well-being

Communities must have resilience to survive and thrive. Resilience involves not just bouncing back after adversity but also bouncing forward, growing and progressing in response to the challenge. In communities, resilience is demonstrated through the various processes that are mobilised to maintain, restore or promote well-being during an incident or risk phase (Norris, Stevens & Pfefferbaum, 2008).

Building resilience requires input from a range of key groups and services including:

- the community involved
- neighbouring communities
- government
- agencies
- business.

Partnerships for success

Strong collaboration and attention to the capacities that facilitate community well-being are vital for the delivery of successful infrastructure projects. Successful partnerships adopt an ethos of working co-operatively towards shared values that focus on the human element of community engagement. Effective partnerships also draw on human capital and personal strengths to navigate issues and crises and achieve shared goals. This ethos can be applied in community-led initiatives and projects or government and business-led infrastructure projects that are designed to improve systems for greater efficiencies and productivity, respond to emergencies, and assist at-risk communities to prevent or minimise adversity.

Those managing infrastructure changes need to provide leadership on a vast range of critical factors relating to infrastructure development, engineering, project management and community engagement. While economic viability is a key consideration, so too is the life quality and satisfaction of community members affected by the changes. Government, business and community members need to partner together to develop solution-focused strategies for addressing local and global issues. A human-centred approach to managing and understanding community change is recommended (Brown & Westaway, 2011).



Community engagement, undertaken as an authentic social process associated with infrastructure projects, can prompt opportunities to foster resilience and well-being.



Aims and visions of Community Engagement

The process of community engagement typically occurs with a specific purpose in mind. Individuals who are connected geographically or through special interests or affiliations come together with the aim of building strong relationships that will enable them to actively pursue shared visions or to address issues that are pertinent to them and will be of benefit to their community. Community engagement is about empowering communities to take active responsibility for their own and each other's wellbeing, safety and health.

Community engagement can serve a variety of purposes, including:

- achieving effective/inclusive decision making
- forming partnerships
- increasing adherence to policy/regulations
- gaining support for a proposed project
- building capacity.

The United Nations *Brisbane Declaration on Community Engagement* (International Conference on Engaging Communities, 2005) has described community engagement as a two-way process:

By which the aspirations, concerns, needs and values of citizens and communities are incorporated at all levels and in all sectors in policy development, planning, decision-making, service delivery and assessment;
and,

By which governments and other business and civil society organisations involve citizens, clients, communities and other stakeholders in these processes.

This definition suggests that community engagement can be gauged by the level of interaction that takes place between government and community members. Consistent with IAP2's Public Participation spectrum, the level of community engagement can vary on a continuum from relatively basic one-way communication right through to genuine collaboration, management and ownership (empowerment). Table 1 provides some further detail and examples.

Table 1. Levels of community engagement

Level of Community Engagement	Engagement activity	Example
Basic Level (Building community awareness)	Informing, educating	Providing information about new policies related to noise from industrial and commercial premises
Mid-Range (Seeking and incorporating community feedback)	Consulting, involving	Getting input from the community about a proposal for a new bike path and using this feedback to revise the proposal
Higher Level (Capacity building and empowering the community)	Collaborating, co-design, decision-making and leading	Providing funding for the community to initiate and manage a project around preserving local history



Getting the level of community engagement right

The level of community engagement need not always be at the higher level shown in Table 1 to be considered effective/successful. It is instead more important that the level of engagement attempted be connected to the goal of those overseeing the project. For some people engaged in the change management process, community engagement might mean getting enough support to get a new policy through. For others, it may mean consulting extensively with target community members to ensure their views are incorporated and their well-being is not compromised as a result of

the proposed infrastructure changes. There are also times where consultation may not be appropriate. For example, if a law has recently been gazetted and cannot be changed in the immediate future, awareness and education rather than consultation may be more relevant. However, when a community is facing a significant issue that affects numerous community members and warrants serious deliberation from diverse perspectives, then higher levels of community engagement are needed.

Project success should not be measured purely on outcomes achieved,

particularly financial return. Instead, it is important to consider the change process experience of the key parties involved and the community resources that have been mobilised in the response (Diener & Seligman, 2004). The Social Framework for Projects considers the socio-environmental factors associated with projects (Smyth & Vanclay, 2017), however there is a void in addressing emotional and psychological factors associated with infrastructure changes. Positive psychology and well-being science can provide some direction in this regard.

How to build community engagement and well-being



Set the right tone

The tone of community engagements is equally, if not more important, than the method of that engagement. Emotionally positive individuals who experience joy and contentment are more open to new experiences, can think laterally and can see the 'big picture' compared to those who feel more negative states such as anger or fear. This is the premise behind the Broaden and Build Theory which has been tested extensively and supported by Barbara Fredrickson and her colleagues'. Those who are high in positive affect are good at building up their networks and skills, which they are then able to draw on during difficult times. Hence, it is in the best interest of the community and the infrastructure change management team to cultivate a positive atmosphere for the community as this cultivates open, creative and solution-focused thinking. In contrast, if the general tone of the group is negative, individuals are more likely to withdraw, resist and create conflict.

Using positive and encouraging language can help to create a positive tone. Although the exact positivity to negativity ratio is not known, a ratio of around 3-5 positive statements per negative statements is believed to support a positive tone. As a rule of thumb, there needs to be considerably more positive messages than negative ones to offset the negatively bias, which is the propensity to notice negative aspects over positive ones (an innate survival mechanism).

Words chosen and language used also plays an influential role in community engagement. Developing a 'strengths' language that is shared by all stakeholders can be helpful. For example, the character strengths and virtues framework (Peterson & Seligman, 2004) encourages discussion that brings individuals' positive qualities to the fore and promotes well-being. The key virtues which underpin this framework include:

- wisdom and knowledge
- humanity
- justice
- courage
- temperance
- transcendence.

For example in line with the virtue of justice, it would be important to promote and acknowledge teamwork, fairness and leadership qualities. Ensuring that this strengths based language is used during meetings and other forms of communication will convey a consistent message and help to build a positive culture.



Foster quality relationships

(See Schueller, 2009)

Strengths spotting in others is a key positive psychology intervention which involves looking for the best in others. Groups that communicate to each other around virtues and strengths (e.g., kindness, persistence, fairness, leadership, teamwork, self-regulation and hope) can subsequently strengthen social bonds and develop more amicable and effective working relationships within the community and with the change agents. Knowing the strengths of others also enables complementary partnering of a number of diverse people so that skill sets from the collective can be integrated and aligned with the demands of the required tasks. This will most likely result in better outcomes and a shared sense of accomplishment.

Recognising and celebrating successes as a community, even little ones along the way, also helps with motivating individuals and groups to keep moving towards the goal (Lewis, 2011). Acknowledgement of pro-social behaviours such as helping, volunteering, being a team player and expressing gratitude to others are also key behaviours that can lead to improved social connections (Algoe, Haidt & Gable, 2008).



Develop shared future visions

Creating a picture for the community of what the community could look like, at its best, in the future is another way to improve the tone of interactions and support the success of community engagement.

Future visioning techniques have been shown to decrease negative emotions (Odou & Vella-Brodrick, 2013) and increase positive emotions and to a lesser extent, positive relationships (Layouts, Nelson & Lyubomirsky, 2013). Alternatively, individuals or groups can create and discuss their own (mental) pictures of what they envision the best possible outcomes might be. Using real case examples of relevant success stories, despite their initial experience of hardship, can also serve to inspire community members to be open to new possibilities and to realising that this situation might ultimately end up okay for them and the community. This can generate a spark to want to take action and be part of a project.



Meaning making

Situations promoting change and genuine community engagement can be seen as opportunities to come together to clarify shared values, priorities and goals and to make an assessment of how the situation and potential outcomes will align with these identified values. **If there is misalignment of values and goals, lateral thinking towards generating something meaningful from the situation is likely to be helpful in reconciling this difference.**

For example, an infrastructure project may inspire some people to become trained in a new field so that they can be employed to work on the project and minimise the need for transient work populations. Another meaning making perspective is that having new groups of people working in the community can be seen as a time for broadening social networks and embracing diversity.

Infrastructure change can also stimulate individuals to learn new things that they would not otherwise have considered. This might mean relocating and experiencing a new community or remaining in the community and reframing, diversifying or negotiating. Infrastructure changes, while not always ideal at the outset, enable individuals to develop and grow and put their resilience skills to the test. It's about 'hunting for the good stuff' amidst the adversity, which in its more extreme form falls under the fast growing field of post-traumatic growth.



Promote agency and self determination

To meet basic psychological needs for individual well-being, people need to feel like they are making their own decisions about aspects of life that matter to them - that they are determining their own destiny rather than being controlled or pressured by others in the way they think or behave (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Seldom, however, in community projects is every individual's preference or need able to be met. This means compromise is often required. For this to occur there needs to be collective planning and leadership, transparency and inclusivity in communication and decision making, confidence in collective capacity and efficacy, and mutual respect. An asset-based approach to community engagement whereby the conversation is centred on the various capabilities of the team and allocation of clear roles and leadership, will promote perceptions of being able to meet challenges with strategy and collective skill. This will minimise fear while building trust and feelings of being in control.



It is important to provide infrastructure and systems that support the autonomy of groups and individuals rather than undermine it. If there are gaps in capabilities that are needed for a successful outcome, opportunities for education and training should be created especially if this will lead to localised capacity building and project involvement and ownership.

Conclusion

Infrastructure change projects need to consider social, environmental, emotional and psychological impacts on individuals and communities. Positive psychology and well-being science highlight the importance of self-determination, competency and relationships to motivate those affected by the change to develop adaptive and transformative coping strategies and to thrive in the face of adversity.

Based on positive psychology and well-being science here are six strategies communities and change agents can do to improve community engagement.

- 1 Establish the appropriate level of community engagement to achieve agreed upon goals and respect key stakeholders.
- 2 Set a positive tone through strengths-based language and future visioning.
- 3 Take the time to find meaning from the change and to leverage new opportunities for learning and growth.
- 4 Publicly celebrate successes and acknowledge pro-social behaviours exhibited by community members and the infrastructure team.
- 5 Identify and draw on each others' values, virtues and strengths early in the process – collective capacity is powerful.
- 6 Provide opportunities for active and voluntary participation in areas of competency and interest.



Applying these strategies will contribute towards a cultural shift of corporate social responsibility that respects the human aspect of infrastructure change. At the same time communities involved in the change will be empowered to employ more adaptive coping strategies in response to change and increase their level of resilience and well-being. This comprehensive approach to undertaking infrastructure projects, and more specifically community engagement, will enhance stronger partnerships, more considered processes and promote best practice. These are worthy indicators of a successful project.



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