



HECSOs
community engagement



TOOLKIT n°4
Key elements for
community engagement



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1 - Rationale and scope

As argued in Toolkit - 3, although various terms exist to refer to engagement (including civic, public, regional and societal engagement), the goal of jointly addressing societal needs reveals to be a common aspect of all these interpretations.

Starting from this observation, community engagement is no longer seeking a unique definition throughout a list of specific activities or areas of actions, but more horizontally is framed by the role of the community as that of a partner whose knowledge and experience can benefit the process by enriching the shared knowledge and produce mutual benefit.

Community engagement can be defined simultaneously as:



Principle with mutual benefit at its core



Methodology involving multiple partnerships and collaborative work



Objective for contributing to societal development and social change

Starting from the evidence of HECSOS multiple-case study analysis the reader can explore in Toolkit 2 - Atlas of Best Practices, this toolkit aims at **unpacking the concept** of community engagement through exploring in depth some recurring elements.

- A) as a principle:** CE is founded on **collaboration** and **cooperation**;
- B) as a method,** CE **brings together people and points of view building a common vision** that enables collaboration and cooperation;
- C) as an objective** CE is a primary goal in order to achieve social change. This is only possible by empowering a community through actions of **capacity building** that enable the alignment of skills to establish horizontal and **collective leadership** for new forms of **governance**.

This toolkit aims at describing each of these aspects as key elements for community engagement.

2 - Community Engagement as a principle

Involving the community in achieving a concrete outcome requires implementing collaborative practices and activities. Encouraging members to work together, share expertise and contribute to common goals strengthens the community and enhances collective learning and engagement.

Collaboration in community engagement processes refers to the practice of working together with community members to achieve common goals, an outcome, an impact. Collaboration involves the interaction between different actors: community members, local organizations, government institutions, and other stakeholders, in order to identify and address challenges and make decisions. Collaboration in community engagement processes is key to creating a sense of ownership, active participation and long-term sustainability of community initiatives. Through collaboration, more comprehensive and innovative solutions can be achieved, as well as deeper engagement by all participants involved.

Collaboration in community engagement processes can have many forms:

- **Active engagement:** actively involving community members in decision-making and implementation of initiatives. This can be done through participation in meetings, working groups or discussion tables.
- **Exchange of expertise,** fostering the exchange of knowledge, skills and experience among community members and other stakeholders. Multidisciplinary exchange and the result of different paths. This can take place through workshops, training sessions, mentoring or partnerships between organizations.
- **Shared resources,** involves sharing material, financial and human resources to support community projects and initiatives. This is done through partnerships with local organizations, government institutions or other entities.
- **Participatory monitoring and evaluation,** implies involving community members in evaluating and monitoring the impact of actions undertaken. This allows them to actively participate in the evaluation of results and any changes and adjustments.



Cooperation within community engagement refers to the practice of working together in a harmonious and mutually beneficial way to address challenges together and achieve common goals. Cooperation involves the sharing of resources, responsibilities, and expertise among the different actors involved in order to create a positive impact in the community. Cooperation is based on the principle of mutual support among the actors involved, this implies that each actor provides support and backing to deal with challenges and difficulties during the community engagement process. In addition, cooperation within community engagement is based on mutual respect among the actors involved: it is necessary to listen carefully to the views of others, value different perspectives, and work together in an inclusive and non-discriminatory manner. Cooperation is critical to the success of community engagement, as it enables actors to combine their resources, skills and efforts to address common challenges more effectively. Fostering a culture of cooperation fosters greater participation, a sense of belonging, and stronger, durable, collaboration within the community.

The following are some strategies that foster collaboration and cooperation:

- **Identifying roles and responsibilities:** and assigning them to different actors involved in the process. This will ensure that each party plays its role effectively and that there is a clear understanding of how the different parties fit together.
- **Promotion of communication and knowledge sharing:** it is important to create spaces and tools to facilitate open communication and knowledge sharing among community members. This will ensure the flow of relevant information and contribute to the success of activities.
- **Valuing diversity and inclusion:** recognize and value the diverse perspectives, skills and knowledge of community members. Promoting the inclusion of all participants in the process ensures equitable representation and subsequent informed decision-making.

Through the application of these strategies, a roadmap for the community can be designed and common practices enriched to achieve community goals through the application of collaborative processes and methods. One collaborates and cooperates with different community members and stakeholders outside the community's boundaries to gather diverse insights, perspectives, and inputs to nurture in the community all the knowledge needed to create a new knowledge asset.



3 - Community Engagement as a method

A community is made by different people, actors and expressions of interests and perspectives. Engaging a community can therefore be interpreted as a methodology (a series of) to bring people and points of view together, making them available and ready to collaborate and cooperate for a common goal, a collective challenge.

Bringing together people and points of view refers to the process of creating conditions in which stakeholders with different interests come together around a common table with the intention of building shared projects. Through an empowerment and capacity building journey, which will be further explored in the following chapter, participants become active and responsive in addressing the difficulties and conflicts that may arise when dealing with different interests. The goal is to actively engage individuals with diverse perspectives and opinions in a process of dialogue and collaboration.

Bringing people and viewpoints together can be understood as the art of bringing community members and stakeholders together around a table, connecting and engaging them in a meaningful way by promoting interaction, knowledge sharing, and relationship building. It is the necessary and fundamental first step in enabling the subsequent sharing of goals, objectives, and purpose and the pursuit of alignment in individuals' thinking.



Bringing together people and points of view requires:

- **to create an inclusive environment** where community members from different experiences, backgrounds, and points of view can be involved in decision-making, problem identification, and solution design.
- **building a safe space** where the opinions of all participants are heard and respected, regardless of individual differences. By including diverse perspectives, opinions, and experiences, constructive dialogue is promoted, fostering mutual understanding, overcoming biases, and resulting in decision-making that reflects the well-being and interests of the entire community. This process can lead to more comprehensive and sustainable solutions as it takes into account the multiple needs, interests, and visions within the community.
- **community meetings, discussion forums, working groups,** or other participatory tools that facilitate listening to different perspectives and interests.
- **building a common language:** finding a common glossary means navigating the "nebula" of knowledge, finding common denominators and points of convergence among the experiences, insights, and relative knowledge practices of community members. A common glossary helps avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations within the community; it creates a solid foundation for effective communication and appropriate information sharing. It makes explicit shared terms and concepts and allows for a common ground on which all members can build and contribute to the collective knowledge of the community. The process of building a common glossary requires continuous dialogue and exchange among community members. Through discussions, comparisons and reflections, members identify concepts and terminologies they have in common, thus creating a common language that facilitates communication and knowledge sharing. It allows members to derive value from points of convergence.
- **producing knowledge assets as resources** within the community, including both explicit knowledge such as documents and procedures and tacit knowledge such as experiences and insights. They are the building blocks of the community, feeding the collective store of knowledge.

Building a common vision Proper community participation requires members to share and work from a common vision and perspective. A vision that guides, gives meaning, and inspires to make changes and help improve community practices. When people share a vision, they understand the goals and direction in which the community is heading, and this common sense will promote the development of its members, the organization, and the stakeholders involved. People understand how the community can facilitate them and understand how they can contribute to the community's success. In fact, people need to find meaning and be at the center; once that happens they will take part more willingly.

Building a common vision requires answering some fundamental questions:

- *Why does the community exist?*
- *What is its significance?*
- *What are the challenges this community wishes to address or the problem it wishes to solve?*
- *Through what strategy?*
- *What does the community need to accomplish?*
- *How could it plan to achieve this goal?*
- *What resources are the community looking for?*
- *What kind of competencies does the community have or lack?*

To achieve a shared vision, and a direction to follow, it is necessary to set clear and measurable goals so that the direction to follow is also defined and a plan to achieve them can be planned. When the goals are clear, the expected outcomes for the community are well-defined and plans can be planned to achieve them.

The creation of a common vision and vocabulary is critical to community involvement because it provides a framework for collective action, builds a shared culture, and makes people part of something larger in which they identify.

It fosters greater cohesion and effectiveness in the pursuit of common goals through a clear and shared direction around which the community is activated. It facilitates collaboration, cooperation and sharing of best practices.

A cohesive collective vision therefore facilitates and enables:

- **Goal alignment:** a common vision helps to agree among community members what the common goals and shared priorities are, stimulating cohesion and harmony among participants and motivating them to act with synergy to achieve common goals.
- **Guidance in decision-making:** a common vision provides guidance in making informed decisions geared toward the common good. When community members have a shared vision, they can base their choices and actions on that vision, ensuring that they are aligned with the interests and needs of the community.
- **Involvement and participation:** a shared vision involves community members in the decision-making process and makes them feel an integral part of its development. When people identify with a vision and feel involved in its definition, they are more likely to actively participate, contributing ideas and resources and supporting collective efforts.
- **Focus and consistency:** a common vision helps keep the community focused on long-term goals and avoid dispersion

4 - Community Engagement as a objective

To better understand the definition of community engagement as an objective, we must refer to the theoretical corpus that sustains widespread **participation in decision-making processes as a paradigm shift in the management of the commons and a radical transformation in the predominant political-economic model to better achieve social justice and sustainable futures.**

For instance, in "Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy" (1992), **Jürgen Habermas** argues that citizen participation in decision-making processes promotes a more inclusive democracy and enables social inequalities to be overcome; in several works, such as 'Unruly Practices: Power, Discourse, and Gender in Contemporary Social Theory' (1989) and 'Justice and the Politics of Difference' (1990), **Nancy Fraser** argues that citizen participation is crucial for an inclusive democracy and for addressing social inequalities. She promotes a vision of radical democracy that involves the direct participation of citizens in the public sphere, addressing gender, racial and economic inequalities.; in his works, such as 'Think Like a Commoner: A Short Introduction to the Life of the Commons' (2014), **David Bollier** argues that citizen involvement in decision-making processes is essential to promote sustainable management of the commons and to counter excessive privatization and commercialisation. **Mariana Mazzucato** in 'The Entrepreneurial State: Debunking Public vs. Private Sector Myths' (2013), argues that citizen participation and greater democratic accountability in the development and management of economic policies can contribute to a more inclusive and sustainable economy; **Donella Meadows** has argued the importance of citizen participation in the sustainable management of natural resources in her book 'Thinking in Systems: A Primer' (2008), exploring the dynamics of complex systems and emphasizes that effective management requires the active and informed interaction of citizens.

Moreover as Toolkit 3 - EU Institutional Conceptual Framework illustrates community participation is a key factor in improving public policies design; achieve Sdgs; enhancing social cohesion. Community engagement is therefore an objective to reach in order to achieve social change and more equitable futures.

Elinor Ostrom has shown that people who are used to living in a community context develop a natural cooperative propensity that leads them to solve collective problems through a more effective use of resources. If put in a position to learn from the context, they coordinate and act together to find solutions that are sustainable over time (Vitale, 2010), generating collective ownership, i.e. the co-ownership of a process that enables stable social change.

Institutions that know how to recognise the capacities and knowledge of communities in solving common problems are more robust than others because they are able to stand firm in the fluctuations and changes, even sudden and unforeseen ones, that a social context may present. In order to overcome the shocks that will always occur in people's living contexts, it is vital to have institutional systems capable of promoting cooperation and learning among people and organizations that care for local contexts. This is possible through actions of capacity building that promote new forms of collective leadership and governance.

Capacity building

Capacity building refers to **a set of activities aimed at developing and enhancing the abilities of individuals and communities to actively participate in community engagement processes**. The goal of capacity building is to provide community members with knowledge and skills that enable them to understand and address issues related to their community. This can include skills and knowledge related to various fields such as communication, negotiation, planning, collective leadership, collaboration, and cooperation.

This process can help create a solid foundation for community involvement in decision-making, problem identification, and project design and implementation. Capacity building in community engagement is an ongoing process that requires collaboration among community members, local organizations, government institutions, and other stakeholders.

By empowering individuals and communities with enhanced capabilities, active and responsible community participation is promoted in shaping their own future and addressing challenges that affect the community and social innovation.

Some crucial skills, which can be defined as transversal, include:

- **Systemic-relational skills** that stimulate an interactive approach, where a system is not merely the sum of its individual parts but an organized whole whose identity is linked to the interdependence of its components. It involves a circular view of reality, surpassing linear cause-and-effect explanations, and emphasizes the context, where every social situation in which a relationship occurs is also a place of learning and a framework of meaning.
- **Cultural awareness and expression skills** that entail understanding and respecting how ideas and meanings are creatively expressed and communicated in different cultures through various arts and other cultural forms. It involves a commitment to understanding, developing, and expressing one's ideas and the sense of one's function or role in society in a range of ways and contexts.
- **Decision-making skills** in problem-solving, which means having the ability to build a multidimensional and multisectoral relationship (problems are discussed with different individuals depending on the nature of the problem itself). They contribute to receiving relevant and competent perspectives from different people and entities to reach an objective decision. It also entails mediating between political assessments and technical/professional assessments.

Collective leadership

Collective Leadership results from **a successful process of capacity building**. Instead of relying on a single leader, **an engaged community gathered around a common vision encourages shared leadership**. It involves giving members the opportunity to take ownership and responsibility for different aspects of the community. Community leadership is shared seamlessly among different members who invest time and support to effectively fulfill their roles:

- actively participating in defining the purpose and mission of the community.
- actively participating in the governance of the community and leading the community itself.
- ensuring alignment of vision and language among members, institutions, stakeholders, and involved parties.
- supporting the sense of community and the benefits it brings to individual members and the group.
- managing the day-to-day activities of the community.
- increasing the profile, value, and importance of the community in the eyes of external stakeholders.
- finding ways to incorporate the community's knowledge assets into formal processes and leveraging the knowledge and skills resources of its members.
- actively participating in the community's efforts, both in real-life interactions and online.

Leadership fosters the development of multilevel governance and horizontal collaboration between different territories, knowledge and actors. It enables crucial challenges for innovation in local communities to be addressed:

- coordinate participatory processes by involving knowledgeable actors;
- encourage listening to little-known networks to mature into territorial partnerships;
- facilitate the design of proposals that can take root in territories through dialogue between funders and local actors;
- stimulate to make available economic as well as logistical, instrumental, organizational and professional resources;
- balance processes of mediation of partnerships and implementation of best practices in favor of real innovativeness;
- develop learnings for all parties involved;
- monitor, evaluate and verify resource management, through transparent processes;
- re-launching projects at larger scales to increase innovation and impact.

Beyond the types of leadership that can be practiced (diffuse/hierarchical) the styles and skills attributable to the leadership role, through which one can attempt to frame them as "professional" figures or "organizational roles," **such individuals become, in practice, explorers and detectors of new needs and aspirations, builders of new relationships, activators of processes and projects, as well as designers themselves but in collaborative forms** that disrupt those traditional of the area project

Governance

Governance refers to the structures, processes and policies that guide and influence the involvement of communities in the decision-making, planning and implementation of projects or programs that affect their interests. It includes defining the community's members and surrounding ecosystem, mapping stakeholders, and creating a risk-free environment that stimulates learning and innovation. It is important to co-design governance structures; communities can have both formal and informal governance structures depending on the purpose, mandate, support, and type of leadership. Establishing clear governance guidelines and structures helps maintain order and equity within the community. Governance allows the creation of a set of rules and codes that can be copied by all and allows replicability and evaluation of the process. It is the establishment of codes of conduct for decision-making processes and transparency in community operations. Governance in community engagement processes involves the development and enhancement of multi-actor, territorial governance systems that are open to citizen participation, so as to produce first an in-depth, more integrated and shared reading of needs, and then a serious evaluation of the interventions put in place and the results achieved. Governance is about how you work together and make decisions; it defines your community's operating model, which is composed of all the processes, tools and ways of working and organizing that meet the expectations and needs of members, leadership and stakeholders.

Governance can be called sound and effective when it promotes:

- **Legitimacy and representation.** Good governance ensures that decisions are made in a transparent, inclusive and democratic manner. This ensures that the voices and opinions of different stakeholders are taken into account and that the community feels represented and involved in the decision-making process
- **Transparency and access to information.** Effective governance provides communities with access to relevant information about projects or programs that affect them. This enables them to fully understand the issues at stake, to participate in an informed way, and to contribute meaningfully.
- **Accountability and responsibility.** Well-structured governance assigns clear responsibilities and establishes accountability mechanisms to ensure that decisions are made responsibly and that stakeholders are held accountable for their actions. This promotes trust in the community and in the engagement process.
- **Responsiveness.** Robust governance enables organizations or institutions involved in community engagement to respond to community needs and concerns in a timely and effective manner. This means that decisions can be adjusted based on feedback and new information received during the engagement process.
- **Sustainability and continuity.** Well-structured governance promotes the long-term sustainability of community involvement. This implies the creation of stable structures and processes that can continue to engage communities long after a specific project or program has ended.
- **Relationship building.** Governance in community engagement helps build strong relationships between involved organizations and affected communities. This helps build trust, improve communication and promote collaboration among stakeholders, increasing the overall effectiveness of community engagement. Effective governance of land development strategies requires the ability to coordinate within and between different levels of government, public administrations and agencies, as well as to engage the private sector, other public entities, NGOs and citizen groups in the affected area.

A governance of a specific community can be identified by the following steps:

- **Mapping the surrounding community ecosystem** and forming committees with sponsors, community leaders and other stakeholders.
- **Identify and decide what decisions need to be made about.** One can work with governance committees such as governing boards/committees or advisory committees composed of sponsors, community leaders, and/or other stakeholders, identified through stakeholder mapping, that meet regularly. All of these are necessary to ensure that the community has the mandate, means, and advocacy it needs. Communities are encouraged to be guided by a core group that shares leadership responsibilities. Members of the core group are appointed by the organization or group, or may emerge spontaneously. Although roles and responsibilities normally emerge from community interactions, it is useful to make them explicit.
- **Formalize governance structures through governance artifacts** and specify how decisions are made. Governance artifacts are part of the community operating model, that is, how people work in the community. The community operating model might also include habits, customs, ethics or rituals that often clarify and reinforce the purpose of the community and shape the community experience. Governance artifacts can take the form of: terms of reference that summarize and specify the community's purpose, vision and goals and/or scope, nature of linkage between different stakeholders, decision-making principles and working arrangements; community bylaws that include a code of conduct, community values or a manifesto that sets out the principles and commitments shared by members; any other artifacts that make explicit what is implicit and that are lived and not just aspirational.
- create dedicated organizational structures, such as associations, to implement territorial development strategies;
- consider creating forms of inter-municipal cooperation or joint management of municipal functions and services as a precondition for accessing funding.
- Adapt governance arrangements to available capacities. Avoid overly ambitious and complex governance structures and procedures for spatial strategies, as this risks delaying implementation and discouraging community involvement;
- Carefully consider introducing new territorial implementation mechanisms on a case-by-case basis. In territories where existing governance tools and arrangements work, the introduction of new implementation mechanisms may not add any value, but may generate conflict;
- Coordinate different actors with equally different interests;
- Ensure that coordination arrangements are flexible and respect the principle of subsidiarity. Coordination arrangements should include all levels of governance, upstream and downstream;
- Ensure that the management body of an area development strategy can perform a range of policy functions and can serve as a single point of contact for beneficiaries and various policy interventions;
- actively promote the creation of institutional spaces for ongoing negotiation and collaboration with private and public actors.

Decision-making structures must be clear, flexible, inclusive, open and balanced: governance structures are there to support the achievement of the community's purpose. Allow governance structures and artifacts to evolve as the community grows and changes. Governance plays a key role in ensuring meaningful and sustainable involvement of communities in decisions that affect them. Sound and effective governance promotes participation, transparency, accountability and trust by creating an environment in which community voices can be heard and be an integral part of the decision-making process.

5 - Conclusions

Having presented some recurring elements that constitute community engagement processes, the questions arise:

- **What skills are needed by professionals operating in such processes? What skills, knowledge, attitudes enable professionals to understand and manage the complexity of collaborative and cooperative contexts?**
- **What tools support professionals in navigating the challenges that a community engagement process poses? How is social change planned and co-designed by a community?**

While HECSOS Competence Framework answers in-depth to the first question, the next toolkit provides a response to the second one, introducing and explaining the Theory of Change and how it can support the process of collectively design social innovation to tackle social challenges.



6 - Bibliography

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