

# The Next Generation Community Participation

## Introduction

To achieve their goals, collaboratives ultimately need to be more than just a collection of institutions. Without community members actively sharing in the process, collaboratives lose an opportunity for better results. Or, as one sector leader puts it: “Without true community ownership, collaborative efforts will not be sustainable and lasting.”

Indeed, it almost goes without saying that beneficiaries are what collaboratives are all about. Their culture gives the work its context. Their involvement accelerates the desired change. And their ultimate buy-in helps to embed that change into the fabric of the community for future generations.

Because their engagement and feedback is so crucial to success, we have prepared this guide to help collaboratives engage with individual community members. This is a guide for collaboratives that say “yes” to the following questions:

- Do we aim to effect “**needle-moving**” change (i.e., 10% or more) on a community-wide metric?
- Do we believe that a **long-term investment** (i.e., three to five-plus years) by stakeholders is necessary to achieve success?
- Do we believe that **cross-sector engagement** is essential for community-wide change?
- Are we committed to **using measurable data** to set the agenda and improve over time?
- Are we committed to **having community members as partners and producers** of impact?

This guide is also supported by three other documents:

- Building or Improving a Community Collaborative – Guidance by Life Cycle Stage: Describes the five stages of a collaborative’s life, including case studies, a checklist of key activities, and common roadblocks for each stage (please refer to [Building or Improving a Community Collaborative](#))
- Community Collaborative Assessment – A Diagnostic of Success Readiness: Helps you evaluate your collaborative’s readiness to implement your plan in the community (please refer to [Assessment](#))
- Community Collaboratives Learning Examples: Capacity, Structure, Data and Funding”: Guides the process of organizing a collaborative and helps you answer questions, such as what dedicated staff is necessary and what structure should support the collaborative (please refer to [Community Collaboratives Learning Examples](#))

We have divided this guide into five sections:

- **Overview:** We make the brief case for why community involvement is critical in tackling complex social problems, which by definition, do not come with set solutions.
- **Examples of Community Collaborative Engagement:** Successful collaboratives figure out ways to tap into the energies of their communities. Here is how a few have done it.
- **Next Generation Community Partnership:** New ideas are constantly emerging to solve old problems. For example, if you want to help youth, why not partner with those youth and have them lead the collaborative?
- **Key Questions to Ask:** From the collective experience of successful collaboratives, these queries can help shape your approach.
- **Resources:** The combined best practices and lessons of many outstanding collaboratives and their partners are available here.

## Overview

Technical problems, such as where to put a school, do not require the formation of collaboratives. Based on population or geography criteria, there is usually only one good answer. Collaboratives, however, are needed to address the proverbial “can of worms.” Such “adaptive” problems are complex, multi-issue challenges that cannot be easily fixed with known or quickly discoverable solutions (please refer to [Source 78, Adaptive Problems](#)). What is needed, rather, is a process of discovery involving a diverse set of stakeholders.

Community participation is critical to ensure that the interlinked efforts of many partners both reflect the context of the community and genuinely meet its needs. All of which sounds complicated, because it is. But the community level is the starting point. It is where the raw data can be found. It is also a source for thoughtful responses and effective solutions.

Poverty and poor student achievement are prime examples of “adaptive” problems. Engaging deeply with community residents on such thorny matters helps collaboratives clearly identify the pivotal issues, generate the needed trust to get people to attempt the change, and to develop action solutions <Source 63, Keystone Constituent Mapping>.

### *Challenges to full community participation*

Most collaboratives start out by bringing the top community leaders together to work towards achieving community-wide change. The key question, though, is: Are all the right people on the bus? Historical community divisions and power imbalances often mean that collaborative participants do not represent the true diversity of the community. Likewise, beneficiaries also may not have a place at the decision-making table. And, without everybody in the community on board, the wheels can fall off.

Funding is often another roadblock to generating true community involvement and representation. In a pay-for-performance atmosphere, providers might hesitate to report negative community feedback on their programs out of fear that it might draw attention to failure and cause dollar commitments to dry up (please refer to [Source 79, Keystone Prospectus](#)). Funders reinforce this through grant requirements linked to success metrics and an absence of specific funding for community feedback (please refer to <Source 80, 21st Century Constituency Voice> or [Source 81, Models of Community Engagement](#)).

Given these challenges, many collaboratives will readily admit that they are still struggling to fully engage the community. But they are also persisting by exploring and testing new ideas. Obviously, there is no one formula for excellent community participation. That, too, is an adaptive problem. But we can share some of the adaptations tried by successful collaboratives below.

## Examples of Community Collaborative Engagement

Simply put, community engagement increases the likelihood that interventions will be aimed in the right direction. Tried and true vehicles for engagement include focus groups, interviews, surveys and community meetings. But sometimes it takes a large, coordinated effort.

### *Community meetings to gather resident perspectives*

For example, when Hurricane Katrina devastated New Orleans, the city desperately needed to rebuild its infrastructure and morale. But many people on the street felt they were not being heard. So, after several unsuccessful attempts to develop a city-wide plan, America Speaks, a nonprofit organization that engages citizens in high-impact public policy decisions, stepped in. Its mission: to listen to the people most affected by the disaster. The resulting “Unified New Orleans Plan” set up open forums for public officials to get feedback from citizens, which helped reestablish authorities’ credibility. For the first time, the city was able to ratify a roadmap that truly aligned recovery efforts with community need. The forums also helped restore hope and connection in the fragmented community. Today, 93% of participants are “co-owners” of the plan and are committed to remaining engaged (please refer to [Source 73, America Speaks Unified New Orleans](#)).

### *Collaboratives using focus groups and surveys to engage with the community*

Parramore Kids Zone (“PKZ”) is a prime example of how a collaborative can use community engagement to get early feedback to set its direction. Before embarking, it staged a series of neighborhood meetings to get input on PKZ’s proposed services and marketing strategies, disseminate information and build resident ownership of the project. To increase attendance, PKZ provided free childcare and food as incentives. Looking back, a PKZ staff member reflected, “We never would have been successful if we tried to tell the community what services they needed instead of listening to their suggestions.” Please refer to the [Case Studies of Effective Collaboratives](#): Parramore [Narrative](#) for more information on the PKZ collaborative.

### *Collaboratives leveraging media to engage community*

When United Way of Greater Milwaukee began thinking about launching what became the Milwaukee’s Teen Pregnancy Prevention Initiative, the agency clearly saw that teens needed multiple reinforcing messages to change their behavior. More was needed, agency leaders realized, than direct education and counseling within the public schools, at nonprofits, and in the faith community. The result: an innovative public awareness campaign developed by Serve Marketing. It aimed to change the conversation among teens, their friends and parents. Serve Marketing started by holding youth focus groups to understand their perspectives on teen pregnancy. It continued these focus sessions as it developed campaign materials to make sure the campaign resonated with youth. The roll-out began with ads making the case that teen pregnancy impacted everyone in greater Milwaukee, due to its staggering economic consequences. City teens literally played a central “role,” through a series of provocative ads, radio spots, and even a fake movie premiere (please refer to [Source 82, Milwaukee Strong Babies](#)). Later, the campaign expanded to engage parents through the delivery of a “Let’s Talk” toolkit designed to help them talk about sexuality with their kids. Please refer to the [Case Studies of Effective Collaboratives](#): Milwaukee Narrative for more information on Milwaukee’s Teen Pregnancy Prevention collaborative.

## Next Generation Community Partnership

The types of changes community collaboratives are seeking in their communities affect the lives of many people. It only makes sense, therefore, that the community be actively engaged in developing solutions and helping to make them work. Next generation community partnership builds on this principle to involve intended beneficiaries as advocates and participants in creating impact. This type of partnership opens collaboratives to a world of “natural allies” that can be tapped. Take, for instance, how a community can tackle the challenges of disconnected youth. Why not add peers, parents, extended family and faith leaders to the mix—the possibilities are numerous. These people that surround and influence youth can be supportive allies of the collaborative and its goals. Even in collaboratives that are not youth-focused, it is necessary to partner with natural allies, who may be residents or community members that can help move the work forward.

### Examples of next generation partnership

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#### *Community members participating in collaboratives*

Youth contributed directly to the development of Nashville’s Child and Youth Master Plan (CYMP). After all, they have the greatest stake in their own future. From the start, a local high school student served as one of the three co-chairs for the CYMP, joined by several other student slots on the taskforce. The taskforce worked closely with the mayor’s standing Youth Council and the students immediately had to overcome some barriers to participation: First, they changed all scheduled meetings until after the close of school at 3 p.m. Next, they gained assistance in transportation to meetings through bus fare waivers. Youth members also took significant responsibility for the work’s progress. Among other things, they wrote, administered and analyzed a large scale survey among 1,000 youth. They helped organize several listening sessions involving hundreds of residents and youth. They were also part of the decision that allowed other community members to interact with the taskforce through a variety of meeting formats, such as small-group discussions and one-on-one exchanges, and ensured that Spanish-speaking translators were at the sessions. Please refer to the [Case Studies of Effective Collaboratives](#): Nashville Narrative for more information on Nashville’s efforts to increase graduation rates.

#### *Community members as producers of impact*

The Family Independence Institute’s (“FII”) work on empowering low-income families is another example of next generation engagement. The effort builds on the insight that low-income families have always worked together to address challenges, using their own assets and resourcefulness. In its latest pilot in Boston, FII invited immigrant Latino women (many from Colombia) to form groups of six to eight to meet together monthly. Each was given a computer and small stipend for reporting monthly data on a wide range of metrics related to the health, education, income and wealth of their families. The women also use these meetings to discuss the challenges they face, ranging from learning English to paying down debt to helping their children do better in school.

Paradoxically, the FII “program” is really an anti-program—it provides no direction or guidance to the women, and in fact has a strict policy not to do so. Families are asked to enroll with cohort of friends and turn to one another and not to FII staff. Results have been very positive. Participating Boston families have seen an increase in income of 13% (excluding FII funds) in less than a year. In the West Oakland pilot, average income rose 27%, savings increased over 250%, debt was reduced and children’s grades and attendance jumped over 30%. FII’s founder is quick to point out that African American cohorts did far better than the Asian and Hispanic cohorts, showing that the concept applies beyond immigrant communities.

FII’s view is that the positive gains are the result of two dynamics. First, participants share their social capital and know-how, multiplying the benefit for each individual family. For example, the women share experiences about where to find quality child care, how to navigate the school system, and where to find legal advice. Second, by focusing on their own family-level metrics related to health, education, income, and wealth, FII families are more likely to make positive changes. As families take action to pay down debt, they see its effect monthly as they report their data—which gives motivation to take more action, creating a virtuous cycle.

### *Community feedback for continuous learning*

David Bonbright of Keystone emphasizes the importance of what he calls constituency voice (please refer to [Source 80, 21st Century Constituency Voice](#)). According to Bonbright, “Constituency voice refers to the practice of ensuring that the views of all relevant constituents, particularly primary constituents [beneficiaries], are seriously taken into account in the planning, monitoring, assessing, reporting and learning processes taking place within organizations.” This type of feedback provides ongoing data to understand if and how specific efforts are leading to impact. Multiple methods can be used to gather this information, such as large-scale surveys, focus groups and everyday conversation (please refer to [Source 63, Keystone Constituent Mapping](#)).

Bonbright gives this classic example to demonstrate the importance of including constituency voice in any initiative:

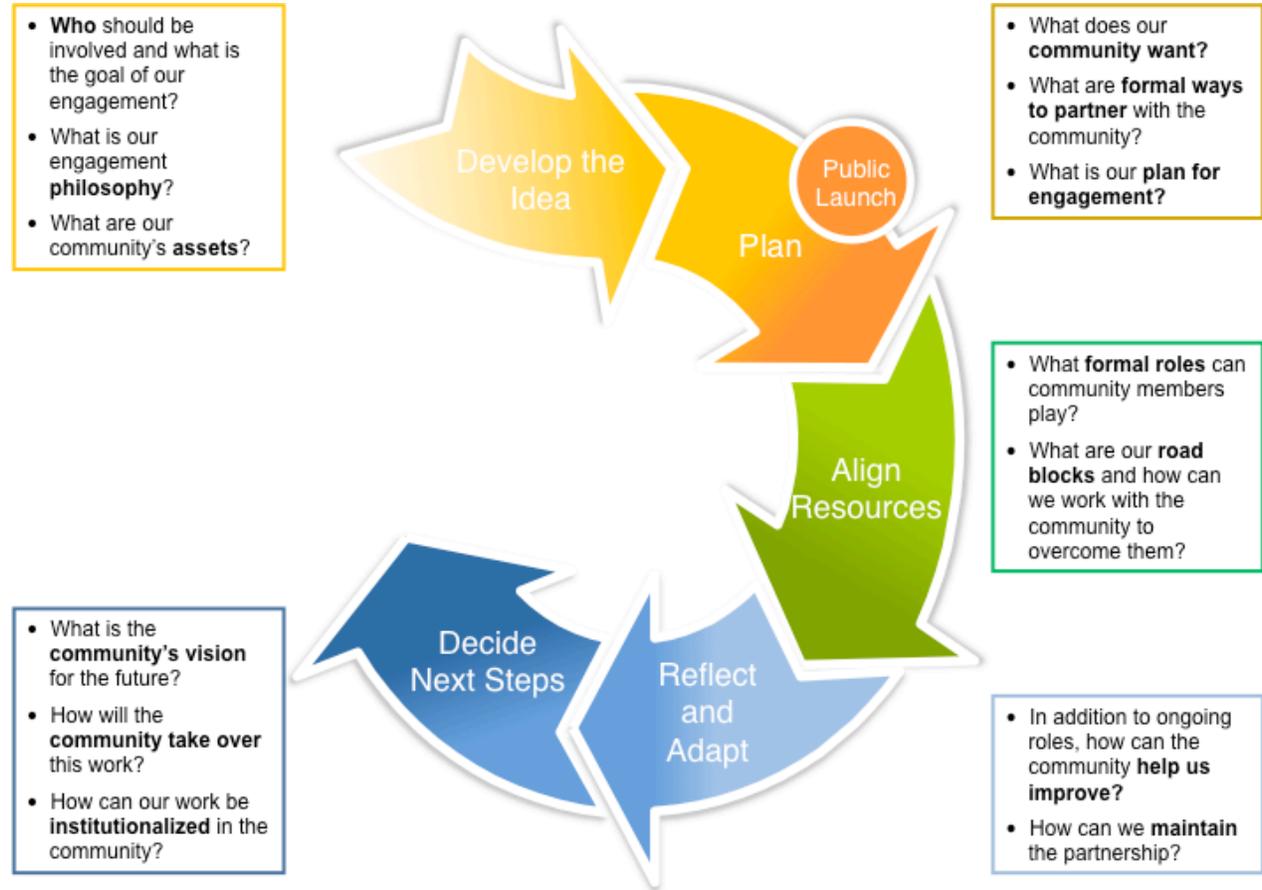
Agencies throughout Africa and Asia invested \$40 million in “tool carriers” so that rural farmers could carry their ploughs, carts and seed-drills. Some 10,000 of these tools poured forth in a variety of different programs. Technical experts thought that these tools would be of great value to farmers. But that was just a theory. The reality was that these tools were not adopted by farmers in any developing country because the farmers did not think they were a good idea. Not having early feedback cost these agencies because they lacked quick feedback mechanisms to receive these constituents’ perspectives (please refer to [Source 83, Keystone Constituency Voice Overview](#)). Indeed, mass surveys or focus groups can not only avoid such missteps, they can quickly create highly targeted solutions and ensure resources are used in the best way possible.

Another example from the Family Independence Initiative (FII) mentioned above highlights the effectiveness of good feedback mechanisms. FII recently incorporated a “Yelp” feedback system to get residents to comment on services in their community. Through this means, those services can improve and community members can begin to see themselves as consumers of services rather than solely as beneficiaries.

And maybe that’s the real benefit from the emergence of these various next generation solutions: to get people actively involved in helping themselves.

## Key Questions to Ask by Life Stage

Community engagement can be difficult. But there's no substitute. The diagram below will help you navigate what you should be discussing and when.



## Resources

Name of resource	What suggestions are highlighted?	Who is this tool for?
<b>&lt;Source 63, Keystone Constituent Mapping&gt;</b>	How to identify constituents and stakeholders who should be involved	Collaboratives gearing up to engage the community
<b>&lt;Source 64, Keystone Feedback Surveys&gt;</b>	Reasoning and tips for using surveys to gather feedback	Collaboratives planning to gather quantitative and/or qualitative data from constituents
<b>&lt;Source 65, Keystone Formal Dialogue Processes&gt;</b>	Reasoning and tips for using thoughtful dialogue to gather feedback	Collaboratives planning to gather qualitative data from constituents
<b>&lt;Source 66, AccountAbility Stakeholder Engagement&gt;</b>	Steps for encouraging quality stakeholder inclusivity and engagement	Collaboratives determining whom to bring to the table
<b>&lt;Source 67, Keystone Constituency Voice&gt;</b>	Explains relationship cycle of community engagement for organizations to follow	Collaboratives at any stage of the community engagement process
<b>&lt;Source 69, Harwood Institute Community Rhythms&gt;</b>	Assesses community's level of engagement	Collaboratives trying to evaluate the level of engagement in their communities
<b>&lt;Source 70, Harwood Institute Authentic Engagement&gt;</b>	Evaluates to what degree organizations listen and engage with constituents	Collaboratives that believe they are already engaged to some degree with the community
<b>&lt;Source 71, Harwood Institute Public Capital&gt;</b>	Identifies resources that community members might be able to offer to collaborative	Collaboratives looking to better involve the community in positive outcomes
<b>&lt;Source 22, Ready by 21 Action Plan&gt;</b>	Provides a case study of how city leaders engaged a community around a shared vision for youth	Collaboratives seeking examples of successful community engagement, especially around youth
<b>&lt;Source 7, NLC Youth Action Kit&gt;</b>	Offers best practices, key questions, and resources for engaging youth	Collaboratives, especially those with municipal leaders around the table, that are focused on disconnected youth
<b>&lt;Source 75, IDEO Toolkit&gt;</b>	Provides guidance on how to apply IDEO's "Human-Centered Design" to nonprofits	Collaboratives working to understand their community
<b>&lt;Source 76: Civic Engagement Measure&gt;</b>	Provides tools for measuring the current impact of a community engagement plan	Collaboratives looking to assess the success of their community engagement plans