

# Community Engagement Framework Focus Group Thematic Analysis

## A. Introduction

This paper summarizes themes arising from a series of community focus groups held October through December 2007 exploring the adequacy of the Community Engagement Framework draft document, composed as a Department of Family Services and Housing initiative. The meetings provided feedback on the draft document, suggestions for improvement, and input on what makes community engagement strategies successful.

Analysis of focus group data yielded three overarching and inter-related themes. First, participants highlighted ways government can improve upon the processes of community engagement. Second, participants raised concerns about the power dynamic that is inherent in any community and government interaction. An imbalance of power leads to a lack of trust and poor communication. Third, participants expressed concern about communication, citing problems with government language and terminology, as well as information sharing.

## B. Research Approach

### Focus Groups

Initially, the Community Development Specialist intended to schedule three focus group meetings with a cross section of community interests (one with a rural focus, one with a disability focus, and one with a mix of community development focused advocates and service providers in Winnipeg. After the first focus group was held, other groups requested a chance to participate in the focus group meetings, so a total of five meetings were held.

A range of community stakeholders attended the five focus groups, including advocates and service providers of housing, women, Aboriginal persons, persons living in poverty, members of the rural francophone community (from the Eastman region), and representatives from the disability community.<sup>1</sup> Two of the meetings were recorded and transcribed by machine and the three remaining were recorded by hand.

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<sup>1</sup> There were a total of 52 participants in five meetings: the first meeting was held at the North Point Douglas Women's Centre (9 participants); the second was held in-house with community members of the Joint Community and Government Members Committee on Disability-Related Employment and Income Assistance Issues (10 participants); the third was held at the Society for Manitoban's with Disabilities Clearinghouse (8 participants); the fourth was held in conjunction with the conseil communauté en santé du Manitoba (11 participants); and the fifth was held in conjunction with the Employment and Income Assistance Advocacy Network (14 participants).

## **Content Analysis**

After transcription, the responses from each of the five focus groups yielded data for content analysis, beginning with two to three coding processes. Content analysis permitted category or theme creation based on the frequency (number of appearances) and intensity (emotionality) of responses of participants. Content that was coded under the same category led to the development of two major themes: comments related to processes (cited 97 times) and comments related to power and trust (cited 89 times and at times, the comments met the intensity criteria). A third but minor theme emerged related to communication and language (cited 33 times, with some comments meeting the intensity criteria). Comments that did not meet the frequency or intensity criterion, and comments that did not fit in with the three themes have been excluded from this report.

## **Limitations**

In conducting research, there are always issues that threaten the validity (accuracy) and reliability (certainty that the results could be repeated if the study was repeated) of the research. This project is no exception.

### ***Issue: Sampling***

To ensure an analysis that yields reliable and valid results, caution must be taken in selecting focus group participants. Selection of participants for focus groups for the community engagement framework has led to a limitation based on community representation. In spite of efforts made to include members from various community groups, some groups were over-represented while others were not present for discussions. For instance, two of the five focus groups included the disability community, leading to possible over-representation. Other groups were under-represented in the focus groups: for example, no focus groups were held in northern Manitoba or with immigrant communities.

The findings of this report provide conclusions that are internally valid, but not externally valid. This means that the conclusions drawn apply to the specific groups that were consulted with (within the five groups), but a larger generalization cannot be assumed for other groups that were not represented. Further, in conducting the focus groups it became clear early on that participants shared similar ideas across the varied focus groups, indicating internal validity and the decision that future focus group meetings would likely yield similar data.<sup>2</sup> The information gathered is sufficient to fulfill the purpose of the project since it ensures that community input contributes to the development of the Community Engagement Framework and other engagement-related tools and processes of the department.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> This is called reaching ‘saturation’ in research methodology and indicates to researchers that they can stop conducting research and move into the analysis stage.

<sup>3</sup> Names and identifiers of focus group participants were removed, and are not included in the analysis to protect the confidentiality of participants.

### ***Issue: Missing data***

The intent of focus groups is to obtain a rich set of descriptive data that is revealing enough to provide a complete picture of what participants think and feel about the topic under study. To understand fully participant's perspectives, thorough and complete transcription is required. A limitation and threat to the validity of the analysis is the transcription of three of the meetings by hand. This may create three kinds of problems: missing data, an inaccurate count key themes, or researcher bias in note taking. To minimize these concerns, the note-taker transcribed notes immediately after each of the three meetings and supplemental notes were provided by the facilitator.

## **C. Analysis**

Participants raised specific issues across all five focus groups, yielding two major themes – improving community engagement processes and the impact of power relations on community engagement – and one minor theme, communication issues. The analysis of each theme below is twofold, including participants' suggestions for successful community engagement (for inclusion in the framework and other community engagement tools and processes) and advice on framework improvement.

### **Theme 1: Processes for Successful Engagement**

The first major theme is that of processes for successful engagement. Though there is overlap among the other two themes and that of processes, the majority of the meeting discussions focused on successful methods to engage the community, and comments to prevent negative experiences. The most frequently cited ideas within this theme include strategic planning, staff training, and government taking a more flexible approach to community engagement. Other ideas were raised less frequently, including building on existing networks and expertise and follow-up.

#### ***a) Issue - Lack of long-term commitment***

Fear and mistrust in previous consultations led some participants to say they feel apprehension that their engagement in the present focus group and the development of a community engagement framework might only be a "one-off." For instance, one participant said "there have been one offs in the past, this isn't one? There is some frustration on both sides." They indicated concern that most of their experiences with government engagement have been cut short and unproductive. For example, one participant commented:

We provide the answers [in engagement] and see that not a lot happens. Sure, there are lots of reports that are gathering dust. It is good to be asked, that makes it better. It's not that the ideas are not being taken seriously, but nothing happens.

Participants frequently stated that it was frustrating when community engagement involves only "talking about problems" without seeing meaningful results, action, or outcomes from community engagement.

***Suggestion: Strategic planning and long-term engagement***

Participants suggested incorporating community engagement with strategic planning and long-term goals by citing strategic planning nine times in the five focus groups. One participant recommended that community engagement should “emphasize outcomes” while another suggested improving “accountability and outcomes.” One noted the importance of strategic planning in examples of successful engagement by the Regional Health Authorities. Additionally, participants requested improved accountability of government to community three times.

Participants described other aspects of strategic planning, but did not explicitly cite them as part of strategic planning. For example, participants suggested broadening the scope of community engagement and ensuring government articulates the goals of community engagement (cited nine times, combined). The main idea behind these statements was to develop goals with outcomes for community. Specifically, two different participants mentioned poverty and lifelong disabilities as examples of the types of engagement they would like to see government initiate. Some participants noted that goal development and an issue-based, strategic approach may improve trust between community and government and community members would “be more enthusiastic on this framework.”

Participants recommended a “process or mechanism to show [the framework] is embedded and on-going...we want this to be on-going and be told ‘this is how we’ll move forward’.” Numerous participants stated they would like to see community engagement take on a long-term strategy (cited five times).

***b) Issue: Staff training***

Participants had much to say about the link between government employee training and approaches to community engagement in the past (issues of staff training were raised 12 times). For instance, one participant noted that the framework lacked a discussion of how government has been trained to engage with community: “where is it that individuals in government are learning, what about what government needs to learn, what about their humility? The emphasis seems to be on community learning, not government learning.” Questions were raised about whether training would be done for high-level bureaucrats. Concern was evident in the comment of one participant: “you’ve got a huge job there, with core issues like staff training and how they interact with community.”

***Suggestion: Better civil servant staff training***

Suggestions pointed specifically to improve training of government staff. One suggestion was to incorporate sensitivity training so staff members learn to anticipate and successfully handle community needs. A suggestion was made that the community engagement guide should include a section that teaches government staff to “be prepared to hear all of the negative” comments they will hear in community engagement. A few participants warned that government staff should learn to cope with community members who use engagement opportunities to vent. One participant offered advice to government in this statement:

Be aware that giving the community the chance to consult, they will dump a lot on government, will give you lots of venting. Keep in mind that

people need to vent, and do not personalize it. Work on validating their venting. Include this point in training in the [community engagement framework] handbook you create [for staff].

Participants recommended that the community engagement guide for government staff include how to listen to community groups and citizens when they vent their frustrations, and learn to move forward in spite of them. One person advised that in her experience, once people have had opportunity to vent they can move to a discussion on solutions. Additionally, communication training could lead to better information sharing and increased trust. Other suggestions involved training to “build confidence and competence in the civil service,” organizing joint training for government staff and community members, and providing training to all civil servants because “if everyone gets core [sensitivity] training it becomes culturally embedded; that is huge and valuable.”

Some training suggestions pointed to participants’ desire for a cultural shift or paradigm shift within government. Participants spoke of “education and training on community engagement...to really build trust...” and hoped that training would “actually create the paradigm shift or change that is required.” A suggestion to incorporate community engagement competencies in job descriptions and hiring practices was made. Another pointed to the opportunity that exists to foster this paradigm change since the Baby Boomers will be retiring and there is “fresh blood in government.”

#### ***c) Issue: Cookie-cutter approach***

Another key process concern pointed to the tendency for government to approach all groups and all programs in the same way. Described as a “cookie-cutter approach” to engagement, participants reported their dissatisfaction with engagement in the past. Main critiques of this approach are that the models used do not always match the specific community needs. For example, rural needs are unique and government cannot assume that the approach they use with urban communities is the right approach for rural communities.

#### ***Suggestion: Flexibility***

Participants noted the need for government flexibility in its approach to community engagement nine times. This flexibility will result in government participating in engagement that fits the needs of the specific community with whom they are working. For example, one participant noted, “It’s really important to be flexible, and not territorial, and that you can work with other agencies in a different way than you would maybe in Winnipeg.”

Participants described other aspects of flexibility. Part of being flexible involves government working on “building on existing resources and networks” instead of thinking they need to start from scratch. Some participants noted that they have already been doing community engagement at the highest levels so government can use this knowledge and expertise as a springboard to successful engagement. Nine comments were made about building on existing networks. Next, five comments were made about including community at the start of any community engagement process.

#### ***d) Issue: Consultation Fatigue***

A key concern raised in all focus groups was that the community is wary of being over-consulted in meaningless, “token” engagement. Participants described consultation fatigue or burnout – government repeatedly meets with and asks citizens what they think, what they perceive the problems to be, and what they need. After countless consultations, they said government proceeded according to their own plans and needs, regardless of the input citizens gave. They noted that they “appreciate being asked to the table” but feel disappointed and extremely frustrated when there is no action based on their input. Other comments point to this issue: “we are frustrated saying the same things over and over again” and “how many times do we have to engage government? ... Nothing changes.”

#### ***Suggestion: Transparency and Follow-up***

To alleviate this frustration, participants suggest that the processes outlined in the framework facilitate engagement that is more meaningful with clearer expectations outlined at the beginning of all engagement. One commented community wants “more parameters set out very clearly, [with] expectation levels” set out. This way, community enters engagement with a clear understanding of their role and of government’s follow-up commitments. Participants also encouraged government to improve upon follow-up procedures, to report back on community engagement outcomes, and to let the community know how the information they have provided is being used. They noted that following-up after engagement is a successful strategy since it builds trust and involves information sharing, transparency, and open communication.

#### ***Other Suggestions to Improve Engagement Processes***

Participants had additional suggestions to improve upon processes:

- Involving government leadership was mentioned three times. Participants commented and asked about high level bureaucrats, the Minister, and leadership involvement in community engagement. They noted that for community engagement to be effective, government leaders need to be more involved and supportive of engagement. One participant stated that for community engagement to “have teeth” leaders must be at the table with them. Another stated that “if community is going to attend a [community engagement] meeting, we want key decision makers there, or we won’t attend.”
- In four of the five focus groups, participants stated they wanted to be engaged at higher levels (levels 4 or 5) from the framework. Though some recognized the value of engagement at all levels, the majority remained hopeful for community directed engagement and joint decision making.
- The siloed nature of government departments impacts upon engagement (raised three times). Two participants recommended including other departments in community engagement would prevent consultation fatigue, and would create better relationships between government and community. They also suggested that the framework was heavily focused on collaboration with health authorities, but could be more explicit about involving other government departments and sectors in engagement initiatives.
- Implementation issues were brought up three times. Participants wanted to know exactly how the framework could be applied, how they could use it in their own

work, and what process or mechanism they could follow to use the framework to engage government. Some participants cited they liked certain aspects of the framework, and said they felt hopeful about employing it to make changes.

## **Theme 2: Power**

In all five of the focus groups, some participants described a sincere concern about the way the community engagement framework read: they perceived an undocumented power differential pitting community (with limited power, resources, staff, and time) against government (who have greater power, resources, staff, and time than community).<sup>4</sup>

### ***a) Issue - Top-Down and Non-Inclusive Approaches***

Participants shared previous community engagement experiences that show how the power differential leads to a strong mistrust towards and lack of accountability of government. They said they do not trust government to conduct meaningful engagement that leads to concrete results on their terms. Participants spoke of previous consultations that were conducted from the ‘top-down,’ dictated by the terms and needs of government employees. This ‘top-down’ approach led to anger and distrust since their voices, concerns, and needs have not been heard when government projects and programs are created. One participant described the last time she went to a government consultation as a “frustrating exercise because we were acknowledged but gagged at the same time.”

Participants spoke of their present distrust in government and pointed to the power imbalance and political reality of community engagement. For instance, one participant stated, “community doesn’t have any real power to act, it is a one-way street.”

Another problem cited was that government typically has a difficult time including the most vulnerable, disenfranchised citizens in engagement. These citizens are harder to reach in part because they fear what the repercussions may be if they speak critically of government during an engagement activity. For example, one participant relayed that recipients of a specific government service were disinclined to respond to a client satisfaction survey for fear of losing their benefits.

### ***Suggestion: Inclusion, Outreach, Needs Assessment***

Participants had suggestions on how to alleviate these power issues in engagement, and wanted their suggestions included in the framework. First, they noted that they wanted to be engaged by government at the very start of planning for programs or projects. This demonstrates good faith on the part of government and sends the message to community that their input is valuable.

Next, participants stated a way for government to include the most vulnerable citizens is to prioritize outreach through partnerships with organizations that already have relationships with these people. Participants noted that government should build on the

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<sup>4</sup> Government refers to Manitoba Family Services and Housing and its staff at all levels.  
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existing relationships that non-government organizations have with disenfranchised citizens since trust has already been established. This trust can pave the way for a more open dialogue among government, community stakeholders, and the most vulnerable, disenfranchised citizens. Similarly, participants discussed how demonstrating sincerity and respect to citizens (e.g., at the field level) will support community members in engaging with government without fear of losing their benefits.

Participants suggested that organizers of community engagement (i.e., government employees) must take the needs of community members into consideration. A thorough analysis of these stakeholders will lead to a greater understanding of their needs, which leads to another suggestion made by participants. Specifically, participants suggested government provide reimbursements for child care and transportation help to engage the most vulnerable and disenfranchised. Numerous participants recommended using varying lenses such as gender, disability, ethnicity, age, and others, to examine issues of importance and determine what work needs to be done to encourage engagement.

#### ***b) Issue - Political Context***

Some participants cited the political context as a barrier to community engagement. Concern was raised that Family Services and Housing is a “political beast” but that the framework seems to be designed only for departmental staff, not political officials. The implication is that the framework has “no teeth” at the political level, emphasizing “a disconnect” between civil servant staff in the Department and political officials. There are inherent limitations to community engagement because of the political context that exists.

#### ***Suggestion: Political Context Discussion***

A participant pointed to the importance of including in the framework a discussion of the political context. One commented that since advocates are aware they lobby within a highly political environment, it would make sense to include this political dynamic in the framework. Comments should include that the community engagement framework is not a substitute for advocacy, and that advocates and stakeholders need to continue their work.

#### ***c) Issue - Power and Community Capacity***

Many stated that the document reads “one-way” in how existing community capacity appeared in the framework and also in the emphasis on a need for resourcing only the department’s capacity for engagement. Each group expressed frustration because they are acutely aware that community capacity exists; yet, they noted the framework portrays it inadequately (i.e., focuses only on a need for building community capacity) and advised that government recognize, value, and build on existing capacity to engage successfully with the community. Second, participants noted that community organizations are under-resourced to varying degrees, compared to government. Several participants stated that in order to engage successfully with community groups, government needs to provide them with adequate human and financial resources. The imbalance of resources leads to an imbalance of power that inhibits societal change.

***Suggestion: Improve the Presentation of Community Capacity***

To begin to address the issue of capacity and power, participants in all five focus groups urged that the framework incorporate information to ensure it is clear that:

- For every comment and note about the need for government resources to support engagement, they would like to see an accompanying comment or note about the need for community resources;
- Government recognizes and values that many community organizations are effective and efficiently running organizations;
- Community organizations have varying levels of capacity due an imbalance of resources (human and financial);
- Government can enhance those community organizations that have limited capacity through the provision of additional resources (human and financial);
- The framework entails government will work to build on previously existing community capacity, and not ignore what presently exists; and
- Community engagement is a tool for empowering citizens and community organizations to reach their full potential.

**Theme 3: Communication**

Communication makes up the third, but minor theme, including language and information sharing. Participants repeatedly noted that good communication is one of the most effective tools towards successful engagement in their previous experiences. They spent time in each focus group explaining how crucial it is for government to learn how to communicate effectively with citizens at any level of community engagement.

***a) Issue - Jargon***

First, many participants noted the government tendency to use ‘jargon’ or lexicon that was unfamiliar to non-government workers. Many participants expressed concern that the language in the framework document was too academic and heavily laden with acronyms. Terminology, technical language, academic language, and acronyms often create barriers to communication. At every step in community engagement government needs to consider levels of language comprehension in oral and written communication to citizens.

***Suggestion: Keeping Language Simple***

Participants recommended using clearer definitions and plain language in all types of communication with citizens. Other suggestions for effective communication in community engagement included ensuring all documents were translated as required (specifically, Braille and French were mentioned). Focus group participants mentioned numerous times that government staff needs to respect the unique language needs of citizens. Government staff engaging with the community also must be aware of the need for interpreters, and ‘keep it simple’ when communicating with the public. Participants also requested that plain language document summarizing the framework be made available for community feedback.

***b) Issue - Lack of sharing information leads to a lack of respect***

A second major concern raised by a participant was how government workers approach information sharing and how they deal with the public: “the lying, withholding of information” has led to a “widespread mistrust of [the] welfare system and reluctance of many people on welfare to get involved in [community engagement].” This decreases the public trust in government’s ability to engage with the community in a balanced way and fosters poor relationships, leading one participant to say the “community is jaded and cynical.” Another participant relayed an incident wherein critical information about an available service had never been shared with her despite her need for the service over many years, and that the government worker explained that she was not informed of the service because she had never asked about it. The participant expressed that people cannot be expected to ask for a service or benefit if they don’t know it exists. Indeed, another participant indicated that it is difficult to get information if you are not inside the government system and that poorly shared information demonstrates a government’s “lack of respect” for individuals. Others alluded to the high workloads of service providers impacting their ability to share critical information in a timely manner.

***Suggestion: Sharing Information***

Participants expressed the need to share appropriate and timely information to support successful community engagement. For instance, a request was made to ensure that the staff guide on community engagement, once completed, be made available to the public, citing it is “so helpful to know the guidelines and processes that Family Services and Housing employees need to follow. It helps in the working together piece.” This improves transparency, builds trust, and fosters successful communication and engagement. Another participant requested government to do a better job of sharing information on the range of government services and benefits available so that people who need them know what to ask for when they meet with government workers.

***Other Suggestions to Improve Communication***

Participants also noted the following:

- that numerous community meetings, sharing and understanding of roles and responsibilities, and taking advantage of networks and expertise that already exists within the community all lead to successful communication
- use internet technology to encourage participation by those who are unable to attend meetings (e.g., a web portal and an E-Engagement proposal)
- include of a glossary of terms at the end the framework; clarify the terms empowerment and stakeholder
- concern with the term ‘level’ of engagement (within two focus groups), noting that it implies a hierarchy that may prevent government from ‘doing’ engagement and instead could legitimize the present status of engagement which is inadequate and ineffective. Participants suggested substituting the word ‘level’ with ‘type.’ Other participants stated they liked the use of ‘levels’ of engagement, since it indicates government recognizes hierarchy exists. They argued that it assigns value to engagement, demonstrating to all involved the level they have been operating at, and sets the stage to strive for higher levels of engagement.