



# Public Participation Guide

EPA launched the **International Public Participation Guide** on its website, to provide tools for public participation and public outreach in environmental decision-making.

This toolkit is designed with government agencies in mind, to help those who must manage the process where public participation is important for decision-making.

It is organized to help design and implement a program of meaningful public participation.

It will help you identify some of the best practices for planning, skills and behaviors that government agencies can use to design and implement a meaningful public participation.

## Who is Using this Guide?

It is initially focused on the Middle East, citing examples of public participation and public outreach from countries throughout the Middle East region.

The toolkit will be used in other regions of the world, including Central America, Chile, Africa, and Asia.

## Introduction to the Public Participation Toolkit

There is a great deal of public participation being implemented throughout the world today. Laws and regulations in many countries regularly require public meetings and comment on government actions. Some require even more extensive forms of public engagement and input. The United Nations and other international bodies have also reinforced the importance of public participation to good governance and civil society, and offer many guidelines, handbooks, and other materials to assist in these programs.



Public Participation has become an important topic for environmental agencies throughout the world. Shown here: a public participation workshop in Cairo.

However, all of this activity does not automatically translate into good practice. Meaningful public participation requires much more than simply holding public meetings or hearings or collecting public comment.

In fact, conducting such events without a thorough grounding in the elements of meaningful public participation can often have a negative effect, resulting in decreased public trust and eroding relationships between and among stakeholders.

(For more information on the ethics, values, and principles of public participation, click [here](#))

This toolkit provides a primer in public participation. It is designed with government agencies in mind, to help those who must manage processes where public input is important to decision-making. It is organized to provide you with a clear overview of important considerations in the design and implementation of a meaningful public participation program.

The toolkit is not intended to replace the important roles of training, experience, or expert assistance and will not turn a novice into an expert. It will help you identify some of the best practices in planning, skills, and behaviors that government agencies can use to design and implement meaningful public participation. It will also help you to recognize the difference between meaningful public participation and less valuable forms of public engagement. Most important, it will help you to select and design public participation programs to best meet the needs of your project and the publics you wish to engage.

The toolkit is organized to provide basic information and ideas as well as useful links to more content on the web. It follows a logical path to understand, plan, and implement a public participation program.

# Introduction to Public Participation

## What is public participation?

Public participation can be any process that directly engages the public in decision-making and gives full consideration to public input in making that decision.

Public participation is a process, not a single event. It consists of a series of activities and actions by a [sponsor agency](#) over the full lifespan of a project to both inform the public and obtain input from them. Public participation affords stakeholders (those that have an interest or stake in an issue, such as individuals, interest groups, communities) the opportunity to influence decisions that affect their lives.

Agencies should not be concerned that seeking public input means having to do “what the public wants.” Generally speaking, there is no single public. Rather, the public consists of a range of stakeholders holding an array of views and concerns on an issue. When conducting meaningful public participation, an agency will gather input from a wide spectrum of stakeholder interests, resulting in a wide range of views and concerns. The job of the sponsor agency then is to balance among these views and concerns and reflect back decisions so that the public understands how its diverse concerns were considered.

Not all public participation is the same. Conducting meaningful public participation involves seeking public input at the specific points in the decision process and on the specific issues where such input has a real potential to help shape the decision or action. It is rarely appropriate or useful to simply ask the public “what do you want.” Such broad questions will only raise expectations and likely direct input to areas where no influence is actually possible. Sometimes the opportunity for influence is quite small, while at other times the public can have a great deal of influence. The amount of this potential influence is the main consideration in designing a successful public participation program.

The section of this toolkit titled *Selecting the Right Level of Public Participation* discusses the different forms that public participation might take depending on the potential for public influence on a decision. These forms include:

- informing the public by providing information to help them understand the issues, options, and solutions
- consulting with the public to obtain their feedback on alternatives or decisions
- involving the public to ensure their concerns are considered throughout the decision process, particularly in the development of decision criteria and options
- collaborating with the public to develop decision criteria and alternatives and identify the preferred solution
- empowering the public by placing final decision-making authority in their hands.

Depending of the form of participation sought, public participation makes use of a variety of tools and techniques to [inform the public](#), generate [public input](#), and, in some cases, [build consensus](#) and reach agreement.

### What are the [benefits of public participation](#)?



Students consider input to environmental issues in China.

Public participation is not simply a nice or necessary thing to do; it actually results in better outcomes and better governance. When done in a meaningful way, public participation will result in two significant benefits:

1. Sponsor agencies will make better and more easily implementable decisions that reflect public interests and values and are better understood by the public
2. Communities develop long-term capacity to solve and manage challenging social issues, often overcoming longstanding differences and misunderstandings.

## How does public participation result in better decisions?

Public participation contributes to better decisions because decision-makers have more complete information – in the form of additional facts, values, and perspectives obtained through public input – to bring to bear on the decision process. As a result, they can incorporate the best information and expertise of all stakeholders. Decisions are more implementable and sustainable because the decision considers the needs and interests of all stakeholders, and stakeholders better understand and are more invested in the outcomes. As a result, decisions that are informed by public participation processes are seen as more legitimate and are less subject to challenge. Decision-makers who fully understand stakeholder interests also become better communicators, able to explain decisions and decision rationale in terms stakeholders understand and in ways that relate to stakeholders' values and concerns.

## How does public participation develop community capacity?

Another major result of sustained stakeholder participation in decisions and their implementation is the development of capacity for managing difficult social problems. This capacity includes improved relationships between decision-makers and the public, and among different stakeholders themselves. Also, when done well, public participation helps to teach stakeholders meaningful and collaborative ways to approach each other, manage difficult decisions, and resolve disputes. Stakeholders learn to appreciate each others' positions by first learning about each others' values and interests.

Once stakeholders are invited into the decision process, it becomes more difficult for them to merely stand to the side and say "no." As participants in good decision-making processes, all stakeholders must understand all sides of an issue, weigh the pros and cons, and make more thoughtful decisions. Stakeholders and communities do not generally achieve this on their own. Sponsoring agencies must recognize their responsibility to help communities build their capacity for collaborative problem solving.

### Think About Community [Capacity Building](#) as Part of Public Participation

Effective public participation depends in part on a sponsor agency's willingness and ability to involve the public in the decision process. While it is critical that sponsor agencies develop the skills to think through, plan for, and implement a public participation process, it is no less important that the public develop the capacity to participate effectively in decision processes. A well-designed and sincere participation process will not fulfill its potential if the public lacks the necessary participation skills. Hence, it is important for government agencies to build the public's participation capacity.

Building participation capacity can be achieved in several ways:

- Modeling the behaviors that you want to see exhibited throughout the process

- Developing and sharing with the public guidance documents that promote the [values of public participation](#) (1 pg, 36K, [About PDF Files](#)) [EXIT Disclaimer](#) and delineate best practices
- Providing training to community leaders and stakeholder representatives in [foundational public participation and communication skills](#)
- Identifying facilitative leaders within sponsor agencies to mentor community groups/leaders by partnering with them during the planning and implementation of public participation processes. Inviting the public to participate in planning the process can create a sense of ownership among the public
- Hiring professional third-party facilitators to provide instruction at the project outset to sponsor agency staff and external stakeholders on [participatory behaviors](#) and techniques
- Where appropriate, using deliberative forums that encourage more active forms of participation instead of selecting forums that are viewed by sponsor agencies as being more “safe” because they control participation
- Providing technical assistance to the public or community groups to help them understand technical information relevant to the decision.

These strategies can help build the public’s capacity for participation. Ongoing interest in public participation, however, will depend on the extent to which public participation processes result in the opportunity for meaningful public input and influence on projects, and the degree to which sponsoring agencies are accountable to these results.



Meaningful public participation helps to build the capacity of any community to work together constructively and solve problems.

## What are the necessary conditions for successful public participation?

Successful public participation requires the following conditions:

- **Clear purpose and goals** – a well-defined purpose for the public’s role in the project that is real, practical, and shared among stakeholders. Sponsoring agencies must determine the appropriate [level or degree of public participation](#) for the decision at hand and set the public’s expectations accordingly. No one benefits when agencies promise more in the way of public participation than they are willing to

commit to and deliver. In fact, making promises that cannot be kept will undermine public confidence in the public participation process

- **Clear structure and process** – well-defined rules about how public participation will be conducted and how the decision will be made
- **Actual opportunity for influence** – the real opportunity for public input to be considered in making the decision
- **Commitment to the process** – managers and staff alike must be committed to the full range of activities required to make public participation work and be willing to obtain and consider public input in making the decision
- **Inclusive and effective representation** – reaching out to representatives of the full range of relevant stakeholder interests.

### **Making Promises**

At the core of every public participation process is a [promise to the public](#). This promise represents what the public can expect from the sponsoring agency with regard to access to and potential influence on the decision. The promise also defines the level of information and communication that can be expected. Sponsoring agencies that make clear, explicit promises will set clear expectations with their stakeholders and will be held appropriately accountable. Without clear promises, the public will interpret a wide range of expectations, most of which are not intended and cannot be met. When making promises, it is important to follow through and consider these three factors:

1. Promise only what you believe you can deliver
2. Deliver what you have promised
3. Demonstrate what you deliver by communicating effectively.

### **What are some additional considerations for successful public participation?**

In order to establish and maintain effective public participation, sponsoring agencies and decision makers should give careful consideration to how they are supporting the process. Some important elements to successful public participation can include the following:

- **Sufficient resources to conduct the process** – provide the funding and staff to support all aspects of the process, including a [situation assessment](#), outreach activities, and obtaining and incorporating public input
- **Participative capacity among staff and participants** – conduct training in communication, outreach, and collaborative problem solving skills
- **A climate of integrity** – trust and credibility of government are essential for public participation. Public participation will not flourish

where government agencies or decision makers are corrupt or disingenuous about considering public input

- **A belief in the value of public input** – the knowledge that public input will result in better decision-making and that public participation results in better governance
- **Capacity to engage** - ensuring that agencies know [how to design and implement public participation processes](#), and that agencies and the public alike have the knowledge and communication skills to participate effectively in the process
- **Complete transparency** – the timely sharing of easily understandable and accessible information to educate the public about the issues and options.

Although the conditions and responsibilities for public participation are significant, you should not feel daunted. Rather, public participation should be viewed as an opportunity to make a powerful decision – one that resolves issues to the broadest possible satisfaction and benefit of interested parties. When done well, the time and effort invested in public participation pay dividends by resulting in a more broadly acceptable, implementable, and sustainable decision.

#### **The Importance of Transparency**

Transparency represents the willingness of agencies to fully share the information, criteria, and deliberations of decision-making with the public. Without transparency, public input will not be based on the same considerations that decision-makers are actually using to make decisions. As a result, the public is unlikely to understand why decisions are made or how those decisions will impact them. Much public outrage is a result of not being provided complete and timely information.

## **Public Participation Situation Assessments**

#### **Who are Stakeholders and what does it mean to be inclusive?**

Quite simply, a stakeholder is any person or group who has or perceives they have a stake in the outcome of a decision or project. Thus, stakeholder as a generic term literally can mean anybody. In practical terms, stakeholders represent the range of interests and voices engaged in any given project, and this includes the agencies, media, and other formal groups. On the public side, stakeholders can be classified in two major groups: organized and grass roots.

- **Organized stakeholders** generally have formed an organization with some level of staffing (paid or volunteer) and resources. Organized stakeholders generally have a higher capacity for tracking and engaging in a project than grass roots stakeholders. Organized stakeholders are generally well aware of projects and can be aggressive in seeking access and influence.
- **Grass roots stakeholders** generally have limited if any resources or time to engage in a project. They often are not even aware of the project or their need to engage until the project is quite advanced. In order for grass roots



stakeholders to engage in a project, sponsoring agencies often have to be highly proactive in reaching out to and engaging them.

To have inclusive public participation, both organized and grass roots stakeholders need to be engaged in the project. It is important to identify and seek out the full range of interests and perspectives that are potentially affected by a project and ensure that their voices are heard.

## **What is a Situation Assessment?**

A situation assessment is conducted for the purpose of understanding the needs and conditions of your project and stakeholder community in order to design an effective public participation process. It consists of gathering information to determine the public participation program and techniques that are feasible and most appropriate for the circumstances. At the conclusion of a situation assessment, you should have enough information to determine [the level of public participation](#) for your project or decision and to [design the public participation process](#).

Situation assessments can range from limited and informal to intensive and time-consuming. Typically, more formal situation assessments result in more detailed recommendations for the public participation process.

## **Outcomes from a Situation Assessment**

Regardless of the level of formality and rigor of the effort, all situation assessments should result in the following key findings:

- the key stakeholder voices that must be engaged for a credible process
- the main stakeholder concerns, issues, and interests
- the specific opportunities where public input can help to shape the decision
- any issues or constraints that may affect public participation.

## **Why do a Situation Assessment?**

The main purpose of a situation assessment is to identify the conditions necessary for a successful public participation process so that the sponsor agency and stakeholders are engaged in a common purpose.

The information obtained through a situation assessment will help you to design a public participation process that responds to the needs and interests of both the decision makers and external stakeholders. It will contribute to a process that is based on a shared understanding of the decision to be made, the issues to be addressed, and the role of the public in the decision process.



Getting out in the field and talking directly with stakeholders is an essential part of good public participation and important to a successful situation assessment.

Specifically, a situation assessment should:

- clarify the problem or opportunity to be addressed and the decision to be made
- define the sponsor agency's approach to public participation
- identify stakeholders and their concerns
- reveal information gaps or misunderstandings early enough so they can be addressed
- identify potential constraints on the public participation process
- surface issues that will need to be considered in the decision process.

## **How do you conduct a Situation Assessment?**

A situation assessment consists of two phases:

- Phase 1: the internal assessment, the purpose of which is to clarify the problem or opportunity, the decision to be made, available resources and commitment for public participation, and the sponsor agency's expectations about the appropriate level of public participation
- Phase 2: the external assessment, the purpose of which is to identify the full range of external stakeholders that should be engaged and to learn from the public to understand how stakeholders perceive the situation and decision to be made.

The first phase of the situation informs the second, and both phases involve directly reaching out to both internal and external stakeholders.

The results of the phase 1 internal assessment will be to:

- identify who (i.e., which group and/or individuals) has final decision authority

- understand how the agency defines the problem or decision to be made
- identify any constraints on the decision (such as regulations and timing)
- obtain a preliminary list of stakeholders who are likely to participate in the decision and the issues associated with the decision
- identify available resources and capacity to conduct public participation
- identify the level of public participation the agency is expecting.

After completing the first phase, the phase 2 external assessment will include interviews with a broad range of stakeholders to achieve the following:

- inform them of the nature and extent of the decisions to be made
- assess their current understandings of the situation
- assess their interest in participating in the decision process
- identify additional interested and important stakeholders.

Situation assessments will begin by engaging with the known universe of stakeholders – these are people or organizations that were identified by the sponsor agency and/or those that have a history of involvement in the issue under discussion. The vast majority of stakeholders who will get involved in your project are already involved in their community. Start with these people and think broadly about who else might be interested in or affected by your project. Interviewing known stakeholders will also help you identify other stakeholders by asking who else you should interview. At some point in your search you will be given fewer and fewer new names, which is a good indicator that you have identified most of the important stakeholders.

When conducting stakeholder interviews, ask the following types of questions:

- How do you view the current situation?  
What issues are involved in the decision?  
How important are these issues to you?  
What are your main interests in this project or decision?  
What information and sources of information are available to you now?  
What other information would be helpful?
- Who's affected?  
Who else should I be speaking to?  
Whose support is crucial to implementing the decision?  
Who has the ability to block implementation of the decision?  
What are the important relationships among stakeholders in this community?
- How would you like to be involved?  
What role would you like to play or do you feel the community would like to play in decision making?  
What are the best forums for your involvement?  
How would you like to receive information and what are the sources of information that you use and trust?
- What's next?  
What types of things could be done to help make this a meaningful process for your community?

This is what you can expect from us next.

## What should you do with the results of the situation assessment?

The situation assessment results should provide you with enough information to determine the appropriate level of public participation and recommend a design or plan for a public participation process. The public participation process recommendation would include what issues should be addressed, which stakeholders should be included, the potential areas for public input and influence, the types of information and input activities that are likely to be effective, and what schedule to follow. The steps involved in public participation process design are discussed in detail in [Public Participation Process Planning](#).

It should also give you a feel for how well the agency's and stakeholders' understanding of the decision and public participation expectations align and whether they need to be reconciled or otherwise managed. If the agency and public have very different understandings of the problem or issues to be addressed through the decision, then it is unlikely that the process will produce a sustainable decision. It is difficult to agree on a decision or solution when parties do not agree on the problem. More work may be required to [frame](#) the problem in a mutually acceptable way and/or align public participation expectations.

For more information on conducting a situation assessment, see the following links to sections of EPA's *Better Decisions through Consultation and Collaboration* manual:

- Additional information on conducting an [internal situation assessment \(PDF\)](#) (28 pp, 134 K, [About PDF Files](#))
- Additional information on conducting an [external situation assessment \(PDF\)](#) (42 pp, 189 K, [About PDF Files](#))

## Selecting the Right Level of Public Participation

Not all public participation is the same; there are numerous levels at which you might wish to engage with the public based on the project, the [stakeholders](#), and the decisions to be made. To identify the appropriate level of public participation for your project, you must first answer the following question:

- **How much potential influence on the decision or action are you willing to provide to the public?**

The answer to this question is critical to the design and ultimate success of your public participation program. It is not uncommon for agencies to promise the public far more potential influence than is actually likely or possible. In general, this is not done purposely, but rather due to a lack of understanding or careful consideration of the role of the public at the conception of the project.

However, the risks of not clarifying the public's role are significant. If stakeholders perceive they will or believe they should have significant input to and influence on a decision but in the end do not, they will be dissatisfied with the outcome of the process, regardless of how much public participation activity may have occurred.

It is important to recognize that the number of activities, expense, and time devoted to public participation do not mean the same thing as the potential for actual public influence on the decision. In public participation, a great deal of time, effort, and resources can easily be expended on the wrong pursuits, in turn leading to negative results. This is particularly true when you follow a prescribed set of activities in a law or regulation without first establishing a clear role for the public.

Fortunately, a number of simple tools exist to assist in the selection of the appropriate level of public participation, one of which is described here.

## The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

The [International Association of Public Participation \(IAP2\)](#) [EXIT Disclaimer](#) designed its [Public Participation Spectrum](#) (1 pg, 622K, [About PDF Files](#)) [EXIT Disclaimer](#) to assist agencies in establishing and communicating clear expectations regarding the intent of public participation projects.

The Spectrum is organized around the principle that the level of public participation is directly tied to the level of potential public influence on the decision or action being considered. This potential influence can vary anywhere from none at all to total. The spectrum is designed to understand the key levels that should be considered within these extremes for designing a public participation program.

It is important to recognize that we are only talking about potential influence. In few cases can you promise the exact nature of the public's ultimate influence. This is generally not apparent until the end of a well-implemented program, when full consideration is given to the input received.

You can, however, conduct thoughtful planning to fully understand the dynamics of the project, the desired and likely nature of public input, and the opportunities to address public concerns, desires, and interests.

Five levels of public participation are described on the Spectrum ranging from no influence (Inform) to total influence (Empower). Under each level, three items are described that help to explain the level of participation more fully.

1. **The Public Participation Goal.** The goal of the public participation project describes the agency's intent with regard to engaging the public in the project and is used to make sure that common internal expectations (those of the sponsor agency) are established and maintained. The goal statements on the spectrum are intended to provide generic guidance and are not expected to be used exactly as

written. As you approach each new project, you should give careful thought to identifying the specific goals that apply to your conditions, opportunities, constraints, and stakeholders.

2. **The Promise to the Public.** Every public participation program results in a promise to the public regarding the level of their potential influence on the outcome of the project and what they can expect from the [sponsor agency](#). The spectrum is designed to remind agencies that they need to make this promise clear and explicit so as to create common expectations among all stakeholders. As with the goal statements, the promises on the spectrum are intended to provide generic guidance and are not expected to be used exactly as written. You should always give careful thought to creating promise statements that fit the conditions, circumstances, and stakeholders for that project.
3. **Example Techniques.** In each column, a few public participation techniques or [tools](#) are identified to suggest the types of activities that might be used at different levels of public participation. As the level of public participation increases, you will seek to engage the public more often and with more intensity. However, it is important to understand that these are just examples and most techniques can be designed to be used at any level of the spectrum.

## What are the Different Levels of Public Participation?



There are many different levels of public participation, but all will benefit from engaging stakeholders directly in dialogue about important issues.

The two ends of the spectrum relate to the extreme levels of potential public influence, from no opportunity to influence (the inform level) to total influence over the outcome (the empower level). These two levels of public participation work to frame the spectrum, but are not actually where most meaningful public participation occurs. At the inform level, since there is no real opportunity for public influence, we do not conduct public participation; however, it is there to remind us that sometimes we can do no more than provide good information to the public. At the far right-hand side of the spectrum, empower represents a level of influence that we rarely provide to the public. Most agencies are not legally able to hand over their decision authority and to do this effectively would require a very rigorous program of public information and capacity building. Thus, it is in the middle three levels where most public participation occurs: consult, involve, and collaborate.

## **INFORM**

The **Inform** level of public participation does not actually provide the opportunity for public participation at all, but rather provides the public with the information they need to understand the agency decision-making process. This level is on the spectrum to remind agencies that sometimes there is no opportunity for the public to influence decision-making and simply informing them is the appropriate activity. When you conduct the “inform” level of public participation, it is important to recognize that you are not trying to persuade or manipulate the public in any way. As such, the inform level is not the same as a public relations campaign. Rather, the inform level of public participation requires the agency to serve as an honest broker of information, giving the public what they need to fully understand the project and decision and to reach their own conclusions as to the appropriateness and adequacy of the decision.

- Both the public participation **goal** and **promise** at the inform level is to keep the public informed.

## **CONSULT**

The **Consult** level of public participation is the basic minimum opportunity for public input to a decision. Consult simply means to ask. There is no invitation to sit down together and work on things in any cooperative way. The agency merely asks the public for their opinions and considers the input it receives as it makes the decision. At consult, agencies generally ask for input at set points in the process and do not provide an ongoing opportunity for input.

- The public participation **goal** at the consult level is to obtain and consider public input.
- The **promise** at the consult level is to consider the public input received and to provide feedback as to how that input influenced the decision.

## **INVOLVE**

The **Involve** level of public participation is more than a consultation. To involve means to include. At the involve level, the public is invited into the process, usually from the beginning, and is provided multiple if not ongoing opportunities for input as decision-making progresses. However, the agency is still the decision-maker and there is no expectation of building consensus or providing the public with any sort of high-level influence over the decision.

- The public participation goal at the involve level is to work directly with the public and consider their input throughout the decision-making process.
- The promise at the involve level is that the public will have access to the decision process and decision makers and will be provided the opportunity to give input throughout the process and receive direct feedback on how their input helped to influence the decision.

## COLLABORATE

The **Collaborate** level of public participation includes all the elements of involve. To collaborate means to work together. At the collaborate level, the public is directly engaged in decision-making. Collaborate often includes the explicit attempt to find [consensus](#) solutions. However, as at involve, the agency is still the ultimate decision-maker. The degree to which consensus will be sought and how much decision authority the agency is willing to share must be made explicit. In the end, the agency will take all of the input received and make the decision. Conducting a collaboration level program is time-consuming and resource intensive and should not be entered into lightly. If stakeholders do reach consensus and this is not given serious consideration by the sponsoring agency, it can have serious negative consequences on the project and on future relationships with stakeholders.

- The public participation **goal** at the collaborate level is to design a process that allows for effective partnering with the public on all aspects of the decision.
- The **promise** at the collaborate level is that the public will be engaged in all key activities and decisions, and their input will be incorporated to the maximum extent possible. Consensus is not always sought at the collaborate level; the degree to which consensus will be sought should be an explicit part of the promise.

## EMPOWER

At the **Empower** level, agencies provide the public with the opportunity to make decisions for themselves. The most common activities at this level are public voting or ballots, but there are other techniques available as well. Government agencies rarely conduct public participation at the empower level. In general, agencies are not permitted to delegate their decision authority to the public, and creating a fair, legitimate, and inclusive process for empowerment beyond basic voting is complex and challenging. Basic voting by itself often fails to create the level of public knowledge and broad range of public input that is needed for meaningful public participation.

- The public participation **goal** at the empower level is to create a program that allows the public to make an informed decision.
- The **promise** at the empower level is that the agency will implement what the public decides.



***Your public participation program may include multiple levels of public participation, both at different stages of the process and because different stakeholders will choose to engage at different levels.***

The level of public participation that you select for your project or decision is the most intensive, or highest, level of public participation that you will perform on the project. However, you will also be conducting public participation at all of the levels of the spectrum beneath that highest level. This is because stakeholders will choose the level of public participation at which they want to participate and not all stakeholders will want to engage at the highest level of public participation that is available.

Lower levels, particularly inform and consult can accommodate many stakeholders. Higher levels of participation require more effort on the part of both agencies and stakeholders and therefore generally attract fewer stakeholders. The highest level of collaboration, for example, involves consensus-seeking and is often limited to a representative group of stakeholders involved in long-term processes, such as long-term advisory boards. At the same time, many additional stakeholders may be engaged in the project at the involve level, attending public workshops and events, or at the consult level providing input through letters or the internet. Still more stakeholders may choose to engage at the inform level, tracking the project but offering no direct input. Thus a single project can be operating at four different levels of public participation. Designing a public participation program must therefore be done with this in mind.

(Resources on [other public participation frameworks](#))

## **Public Participation Process Planning**

### **The Importance of Relationships**

You cannot effectively participate with people you do not know. Formal public hearings where agency staff never actually meet or interact with the public often fail because there are simply no relationships upon which to base communication. Relationships define the ability to fully understand one another and give proper consideration to one another's needs, issues, and concerns. In designing a public participation program, you need to pay a great deal of attention to creating the opportunities to get to know key stakeholders and create the kinds of dialogue spaces necessary to build trust and understanding.

The success of a public participation program is largely determined by how thoroughly and thoughtfully it is planned. Successful meetings and events are determined by the degree to which an agency effectively commits to and prepares for the entire process, especially creating and providing the information needed by [stakeholders](#) and building effective relationships with key stakeholders.

There are five key steps in the planning process, each of which is discussed below:

1. [Organize for Participation](#)
2. [Identify and Get to Know Your Stakeholders](#)
3. [Pick an Appropriate Level of Public Participation](#)
4. [Integrate Public Participation in the Decision Process](#)
5. [Match Public Participation Tools to Objectives Throughout the Process](#)

## **Step 1. Organize for Participation**

### ***Ensure that public input is possible***

The first step in planning for public participation is to ensure that you are seeking to obtain and use public input and not merely seeking public buy-in to an already determined outcome.

If there is little or no room for public influence over the decision, then public participation is not a reasonable option for your project. Instead, you should consider a public information or public relations project appropriate to your needs, timing, and circumstances.

### ***Ensure that the [sponsor organization](#) is committed and able to involve the public***

Once it is determined that real public participation is your intent, it is important to engage all levels of the sponsor organization, especially the decision-makers, to understand their willingness to engage the public in the decision or action, and what the organization is seeking to gain from public participation. Factors to consider include:

- Are decision-makers open to and committed to considering public input in the decision process?
- Are there constraints around the decision that limit the ability to engage the public?
- What will a "successful" decision look like?
- Are there conflicting or competing priorities or goals within the sponsor organization?
- Are there unspoken interests or hidden agendas?
- Will the sponsor agency commit the necessary resources? Can the required staff commit the necessary time?
- Is there internal public participation capability? If not, can it be developed with additional training? Is the sponsor willing to contract for the expertise needed?
- To what extent will the decision-maker and key project personnel commit to public participation? What needs to be done to affirm and strengthen this commitment?

### ***Identify where public input is desired and possible***

It is not always possible for the public to be involved in all major decisions, or in all aspects of any given decision or action. It is essential for an agency to clarify for itself the specific issues and questions where public input is desired and where the public can have influence. Any constraints to public input need to be identified. The more clearly you articulate the areas for input, the more meaningful the ultimate input will be.

### ***Assess and assemble needed skills***

A wide variety of skills and experience are required to plan and implement meaningful public participation. Paramount among these are:

**Communication.** The ability to identify and to portray the information that the public requires in order to participate meaningfully. The ability to listen for and understand the public's interests and concerns.

**Facilitation.** The ability to recognize the importance, role and appropriate use of a facilitative presence and apply it effectively in facilitating both the overall process and specific events.

**Conflict Management.** The ability to recognize the role of conflict in reaching a final solution and to work through and manage conflict situations.

### ***Identify and commit needed resources***

Identify the individuals, resources, organizations, and contractors that you will need to conduct the various facets of public participation and meet your promise to the public. Identify any training and development that is necessary for the team to succeed. Get these in place early so that all team members can plan together and begin developing needed stakeholder relationships.



Consider working directly with your stakeholders to design your public participation program. This will dramatically improve stakeholder understanding and support of the process.

## **Step 2. Identify and Get to Know Your Stakeholders**

### ***Identify the range of stakeholder perspectives that should be involved in your project***

It is important to conduct a [situation assessment](#) to understand who might be impacted, who should be involved, and what concerns they bring to the process. It is essential that you identify all of the viewpoints and interests that must be heard to create a fully participatory process.

You should consider a broad range of interests that may be important to the community such as:

- Health
- Safety
- Pollution
- Property values
- Jobs
- Congestion
- Crime
- Local economy

### ***Identify specific stakeholders***

By matching specific groups and individuals to the identified interests, you will ensure that your process will engage the full range of perspectives needed to conduct meaningful public participation.

You can identify additional information about the range of interests to be engaged by asking specific questions about your stakeholder community, such as:

- Who will be directly affected by the decision?
- Who will be indirectly affected by the decision?
- Who wants to be involved?
- Who is already engaged or has contacted us in this issue?
- Who will be upset if they have no input to this decision?
- Who can affect the decision?
- Who can claim a legal standing (legal rights to...) that would be affected by the decision?
- Who has real or perceived moral claims that could affect the decision process or outcome?
- Who has the political clout to draw elected and appointed officials into the dispute?
- Who is committed to the various interest groups, such as community groups or business groups, and will be responsible for acting as liaison and leader?
- Who will be responsible for implementing the decision?
- Whose support is needed to implement and enforce the decision?
- Who could take legal action to block implementation of the decision?
- Who could undermine the decision?
- Who is committed to resolving this issue?
- Who will be committed to following the process, including attending meetings, gathering information, and other practical, logistical, and tactical requirements of the process?

At the end of this assessment, you should have built a comprehensive stakeholder list. This forms the foundation for your outreach and ensures that you are reaching the full range of community interests throughout the project. This list should grow throughout the process as more stakeholders are identified and become interested. It is important to identify reliable means for communicating with each stakeholder.

### ***Build relationships***

Once you have identified the full range of interests that need to be engaged and have specific groups and individuals that are representative of those interests, it is important to begin the process of understanding your stakeholders and relationship-building.

No effective participation process can be designed without first learning about and developing some level of relationship with the stakeholders that will be engaged. Meeting with stakeholders at the beginning of a project will help you to know your public, make them more accepting of you and the information you provide, and help you to design a public participation program that responds to their needs and concerns.

### ***Conduct [stakeholder interviews](#)***

The most direct and effective process is to engage in extensive stakeholder interviews during the project planning stage. Try to reach a diverse set of stakeholders representing all of the interests that you have identified.

The interview process involves going directly to your stakeholders and asking them about their concerns, interests, and values. Get to know them as people and let them get to know you as well. It is important to understand how your stakeholders view your project and why. A guide to designing these interviews can be seen in the [situation assessment](#) section.

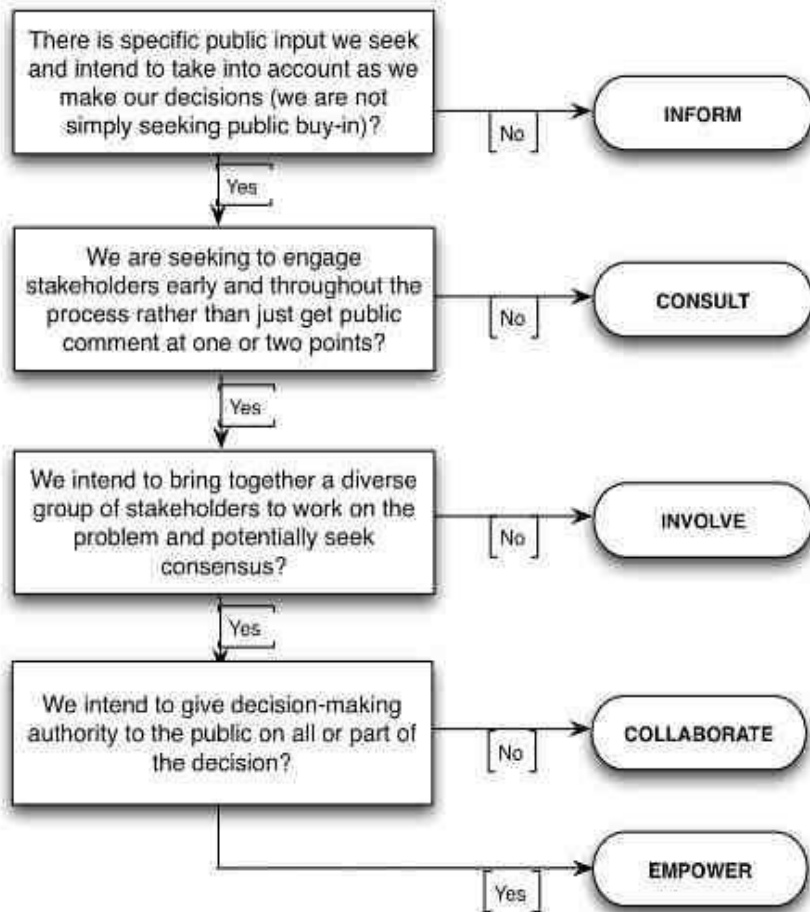
## **Step 3. Select an Appropriate [Level of Public Participation](#)**

The different levels of public participation are described in the section, [Selecting the Right Level of Public Participation](#). There is no “right” level of public participation. For each project, agencies must consider the circumstances, their willingness and ability to share power, and the nature of the stakeholders’ desire and need to participate.

As a rule of thumb, it is a good idea to try to meet the participation needs and desires of key stakeholders. Stakeholders who are shut out of a process that is important to them will not simply go away. Rather, they will look for other venues – such as legal, political, or media – in which to influence the decision.

However, in no circumstance should an agency ever commit to participation at a level higher than the decision-makers are willing or able to engage stakeholders.

The following flowchart can be useful in understanding your intent and matching that to an appropriate level of public participation. You can also think about additional questions to ask yourself at each stage.



Once you identify the right level of public participation for your project, remember that you must develop a clear [goal statement](#) for public participation so that everyone on the team has the same understanding of the role of the public.

You must also prepare a clear [promise to the public](#), so that all stakeholders understand their potential for influence on the decision and what they can expect from you as the process progresses.

#### **Step 4. Integrate Public Participation in the Decision Process**



Creating an environment for dialogue, particularly by breaking into smaller groups, is an effective way to both get public input and help the public learn about each other's viewpoints.

In order to have clear and meaningful public participation, it is important for all stakeholders to fully understand the decision process being used. Creating a visual representation of this process is helpful. Both internal and external stakeholders must have the same understanding and expectations regarding the decision process and how and when public input will be obtained. Key points to consider in describing the decision process include:

- What are the key steps and timing in the process?
- At which points will public input be obtained and used?
- How will the public be kept informed throughout the process?
- How will decision criteria be established?
- How will alternatives be developed?
- Who will make the final decision?

Meaningful participation requires that public participation activities be integrated directly into the steps in the decision process. It is essential to start public participation early so that stakeholders and staff are on the same learning curve about issues and development of alternatives and solutions. Most important, it is essential that stakeholders have a common understanding of the problem to be addressed and the criteria that will be used to arrive at a decision. These early activities are critical to getting meaningful input and an overall understanding of the final decision.

### **Step 5. Match Public Participation Tools to Objectives Throughout the Process**

Once the decision process is mapped out, it will become clear where and how the public is to be engaged. At each point that the public is to be informed or provide input, it is important to identify a clear objective for that interaction in order to design an effective process and to maintain clear expectations among all stakeholders.

Only after clear goals and objectives are established can appropriate tools be selected and customized to the circumstances and audience in order to best meet the established objectives. In any given process, a variety of tools will likely be required including:

- [Tools to inform](#)
- [Tools for generating input](#)
- [Tools for consensus-building and agreement seeking](#)

An overview of these tools is provided in other sections of this toolkit.

(More resources on [planning for public participation](#))

### Communicating with Stakeholders

All public participation requires effective communication with stakeholders. Communication is much more than creating fact sheets or web sites. Three key elements of effective communication include:

- **Relationships:** think about all of the key stakeholders that should be working with you as a sponsor agency and should be working with each other. Use every opportunity to build and strengthen those relationships as you move through your public participation program.
- **Information sharing:** any public participation project requires good communication of detailed information. Think about how to create sustainable vehicles for communicating with your stakeholders and durable locations for maintaining and sharing information. Train staff to become better communicators, producing accessible and understandable materials. Create the kind of foundational information about your programs that can be reused consistently over time.
- **Dialogue Spaces:** much traditional public participation does not provide for the types of real [dialogue](#) that are necessary for productive interaction and decision-making. Sponsoring agencies need to model the behavior they wish to see in their stakeholders and create the kind of spaces where people can interact successfully. Look for “teachable moments” where it is possible to explain why things worked well or did not work well from a process standpoint. In this way communities will understand what makes a process successful or not.

## Public Participation Tools





Facility Tours, such as this one in Belize, help citizens to understand environmental issues and projects.

There are a number of tools or techniques that you can use to implement your public participation process. These include in-person tools (those that involve face-to-face interaction – meetings or workshops, for example) and remote tools (those that do not involve face-to-face interaction – written surveys or websites, for example). This tools section is organized around the fundamental purpose of the tool:

- [Tools to Inform the Public](#) -- techniques that you can use to provide members of the public with the information they need to understand the project and decision process
- [Tools to Generate and Obtain Input](#) -- techniques that you can use to obtain public input to the decision process
- [Tools for Consensus Building and Agreement-Seeking](#) – techniques that you can use to bring diverse groups of [stakeholders](#) together to engage in shared learning and decision making.

Each tools page includes questions to consider when selecting a tool and a table of some available tools with information on situations and purposes for which each tool is best suited. Each tool listed in the table contains a link to tipsheet or outside resource that provides a description of the tool, advantages and challenges associated with the tool, and principles for successful planning.

## **Foundational Skills, Knowledge, and Behaviors**

The individual skills and behaviors of the project team are paramount to a successful public participation program. There is no one magic skill that will help you to always succeed. However the right attitudes and behaviors are always necessary for success and will go a long way in building the trust and credibility necessary for successful public participation.

The skills, knowledge, and behaviors outlined in this section are all essential for success. All can be learned, but all require practice, experience, and diligence to ensure their effective use. Few public participation projects can achieve success without all of these actions taking place.

## Fundamental Understanding of Public Participation Principles

All of the information presented on this website is designed around fundamental principles of meaningful participation that are essential for the trust-building and credibility that lead to project success. They are:

- Clear, defined opportunity for the public to influence the decision
- Management commitment to fully consider public input in decision making
- Engagement of the full range of [stakeholders](#) from the community
- Focus on building relationships between and among stakeholders
- Creating and sharing truthful, comprehensive, and clear information.

(For resources on Public Participation Ethics, Values, and Principles click [here](#))

## Fundamental Understanding of Public Participation Behaviors

Ultimately, it is how agency staff behave that determines the success or failure of public participation and convinces others to participate in a meaningful way. Behavior of the sponsoring agency will set the tone for the entire process. These behaviors cannot be faked; they must represent the sincere intent of the agency to build and implement effective public participation programs. Important behaviors for public participation include the following:



Engaging and respecting a wide range of stakeholder input is critical to effective participation.

- **Transparency** to open up the process and allow all of the parties to understand how decisions are being made and the information that is being considered, and to approach problems as colleagues in order to understand the issues and solve the problems
- **Openness** to different stakeholders, ideas, input, and ways of working with people
- **Humility** in order to suspend judgment and assumptions, value the contributions of others, and take the attitude of a learner
- **Respect** for individuals, for their experience, points of view, emotions, and needs, and provide validation of each individual's experience and values
- **Honesty** to always provide truthful and timely information

- **Reliability** to put forth the effort it takes to make a participatory process work and to do what you promise
- **Flexibility** to recognize that you cannot predict all contingencies in advance and will have to adjust the process as you proceed
- **Resiliency** to move the process forward even through difficult and controversial circumstances.

## Project Management

Planning and management are essential to public participation. The project management skills in which agency staff will need to gain proficiency include:

- **Situation Assessment.** The ability to engage in stakeholder interviews to assess internal and external needs, constraints, and conditions for effective planning.
- **Goal-setting.** The ability to define clear, understandable goals and objectives for the role of the public in the decision process. The ability to describe individual roles and responsibilities for all team members in regard to public participation.
- **Planning.** The ability to synthesize the results of the situation assessment into understandable and actionable components. The ability to define the overall decision process and identify and integrate the appropriate public participation activities to achieve the goals and objectives.
- **Process Management.** The ability to keep all activities moving forward, organize activities for success, keep track of goals and objectives over time, and integrate different team members' activities.
- **Meeting and Event Management.** The ability to plan all logistical elements of meetings including facility selection and booking, publicity, setup, audio visual support, organizing all activities and roles, registration, and collecting input.
- **Evaluation.** The ability to design evaluation metrics to gauge the success of the public participation process and events. The ability to collect, assess, and act on the data from evaluation to improve project performance. (For resources on evaluation click [here](#).)

## Stakeholder Communications

Effective communication is the foundation of any public participation program. The ability to create and distribute effective information, develop meaningful relationships, and listen to public input is essential. The basic communication skills required for any successful public participation project include:

- **Effective writing.** The ability to create clear and concise written messages in plain language.
- **Translating complex information into understandable formats.** The ability to combine words and graphics to make difficult and complex issues understandable to a lay audience.
- **Presenting information in public settings.** The ability to present information to large audiences in a comfortable and understandable

way. The ability to create effective visual information that assists the audience's understanding.

- **Interpersonal skills.** The ability to relate to people in face-to-face situations, to make them feel comfortable and secure, and to exhibit key public participation behaviors at all times.
- **Active listening.** The ability to focus on the speaker and portray the behaviors that provide them with the time and safety needed to be heard and understood.

## Neutral Facilitation

For many projects, a neutral facilitator can help make the overall process work as well as facilitate specific meetings and events. Facilitation includes the full range of management and support required to help a group to accomplish its goals.

There is a wide range of perspectives about the ideal nature and values of facilitation, much as there is a wide range of perspectives about the ideal nature and values of leadership. Someone who has strong knowledge and skills regarding group dynamics and processes is often most appropriate to serve as a facilitator. An effective facilitator might also require strong knowledge and skills regarding the particular topic or content that the group is addressing in order to reach its goals.

Facilitation fills an important impartial role to ensure all voices are heard and understood, and that the discussion stays on topic to the specific project. Key facilitation activities include:

- Suggest procedures, processes, and structures that promote inclusion and participation
- Prepare and implement a process workplan
- Get to know all participants' values, interests, and concerns
- Get to know the issues inside and out
- Advocate for all of the skills, behaviors, and goals of the process and/or meeting
- Act as learning and dialogue guides
- Ensure logistical arrangements that meet the needs of the participants
- Ensure all voices are included and heard
- Help participants understand the importance of process
- Design structured thinking activities
- Teach people how to participate
- Identify and clarify conflicts
- Mediate small conflicts
- Identify common ground as it emerges
- Enforce agreed-upon procedures and processes
- Suggest, get commitment to, and enforce ground rules.

View/Download [Public Participation Foundational Skills Capacity Matrix \(PDF\)](#) (2 pp, 29K, [About PDF Files](#))

(More resources on [public participation skills and behaviors](#))

# Public Participation Resources

## Promotional Fliers for Use and Download

**New!** Promote the [Public Participation Guide](#) with these printable PDF ([About PDF Files](#)) fliers:

- [Engage the Public. Preserve the Planet. \(English\)](#) (2 pg, 409K)
- [Vinculando el Público. Preservando el planeta. \(Spanish\)](#) (2 pg, 414K)

There is a vast amount of resources available on public participation. This section provides information on some of those resources. It includes the following:

**Case studies** – three case studies of public participation in Middle East countries:

- [Lower Jordan River Rehabilitation Project](#)
- [Matruh Resource Management Project, Egypt](#)
- [Community Involvement in the Management of Environmental Pollution, Tunisia](#)

[An annotated list of internet resources on public participation, organized by the following topics](#)

- Public Participation [Ethics, Values, and Principles](#)
- [Benefits](#) of Public Participation
- Public Participation [Process Design](#), organized by the following themes
  - [Frameworks](#) for Public Participation
  - [Planning](#) for Public Participation
  - Public Participation [Process Implementation](#)
  - Public Participation Process [Evaluation](#)
  - Public Participation [Skills and Behaviors](#)
- Public Participation [Toolkits](#)
- Specific Public Participation [Tools](#)
  - [Tools to Inform](#)
  - [Tools to Obtain Input](#)
  - [Tools for Consensus Building](#)
  - [Non-traditional Tools](#)
- Public Participation [Case Studies](#)
- Public Participation [Articles, Papers, and Guidebooks](#)

[A glossary of common public participation terms](#)

## Glossary of Public Participation Terms

*Active listening:* A form of listening designed to elicit as much information as possible from the speaker so as to understand the content of what is being said, the speaker's emotions, and make the speaker feel that she or he has been heard. Active listening involves the use of non-verbal behavior to

demonstrate interest in what the speaker is saying, open-ended questions to elicit information from the speaker, and paraphrasing or summarizing to confirm understanding.

*Capacity building:* In the context of public participation, capacity building is a process in which a sponsor agency or facilitator improves the ability of stakeholders and communities to engage with one another to participate in a decision process.

*Collaboration:* A process in which parties agree to work together to resolve commonly understood problems in a cooperative manner

*Common ground:* A collection of opinions, interests, or values that persons or groups of people share with one another, even though they may not agree about other things. Finding common ground is a technique for facilitating dialogue and can be a basis for parties to reach mutual understanding or agreement.

*Conflict management:* The ability to recognize and manage conflict dynamics to enable disputing parties to work together in a decision process. Conflict management typically involves advance work with disputants to determine the issues to be discussed, the use of ground rules or group norms to guide behavior, and the use of a facilitator to manage discussions.

*Consensus:* An outcome from group decision-making in which the group develops an agreement that is good enough (though not necessarily perfect) so that all of the people at the table are willing to support it.

*Consensus-building:* A process in which people agree to work together to resolve common problems in a relatively informal, cooperative manner. It is a technique that can be used to bring together representatives from different stakeholder groups early in a decision-making process. A facilitator helps participants design and implement their own strategy for developing group solutions to the problems.

*Cultural skills:* A collection of skills that allow a person to communicate and interact effectively with people with different opinions, interests, or values. These skills are used by sponsor agencies or facilitators during public participation processes to provide information and build effective relationships with key stakeholders.

*Dialogue:* A structured conversation, or series of conversations, intended to create, deepen, and build human relationships and understanding. The goal of dialogue is often simply to improve interpersonal understanding and trust.

*Facilitation:* A process used to help a group of people or parties have constructive discussions about complex, or potentially controversial issues. The facilitator provides assistance by helping the parties

set ground rules for these discussions, promoting effective communication, eliciting creative options, and keeping the group focused and on track.

*Frames:* Ways of defining a problem. Some people may define a problem in terms of rights, while others may define it in terms of interests or relative power. These different positions are sometimes referred to as different "frames."

*Goal statement:* In the context of public participation, a goal statement is the well-defined purpose of a plan that is real, practical and shared. A goal is established while mapping out a decision process so that all stakeholders fully understand the decision process being used.

*In-person tools:* Techniques that a sponsor agency can use to obtain input or inform the public in a face-to-face setting. These include workshops, focus groups, citizen advisory committees, and key-pad voting.

*Interests:* The needs, hopes, fears, or motivations that usually underlie a person's or group's stated goal or preferred outcome (known as their position). When stakeholders in a public participation process to focus on their interests instead of their positions it increases the possibility that the decision will satisfy multiple interests of diverse stakeholders.

*Public Participation Spectrum:* The International Association for Public Participation Spectrum consists of five levels of public participation, from simply informing the public about the decision to be made to placing final decision power in the public's hands. Each level involves an explicit goal. The five levels and associated goals of the Spectrum are:

- *Inform* - to provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives opportunities and/or solutions.
- *Consult* - to obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.
- *Involve* - to work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.
- *Collaborate* - to partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.
- *Empower* - to place final decision-making in the hands of the public.

*Public participation:* A process that consists of a series of activities and actions conducted by a sponsoring agency or other entity to both inform the public and obtain input from them. Public participation affords stakeholders the opportunity to influence decisions that affect their lives. Other terms for public participation include public involvement and public engagement.

*Public participation behaviors:* Behaviors that embody the principles of authentic public participation and set the tone for the public participation process. These include:

- *Transparency* - the act of promoting accountability and providing information for citizens about what the Government is doing.
- *Openness* - the act of including multiple interests and stakeholders in the decision making process.
- *Humility* - the act of doing something in the interest of another person or group of people.
- *Respect* - the act of honoring somebody or something by showing positive feelings through language or gestures.
- *Honesty* - the act of doing something that is considered fair and truthful.
- *Reliability* - the act of doing something that is expected or has been promised.
- *Flexibility* - the act of changing according to circumstances or changing because of persuasion or considering multiple options.
- *Resiliency* - the act of recovering quickly from setbacks.

*Remote tools:* Techniques that an agency can use to obtain input or inform the public in a non face-to-face setting. These include comment sheets, surveys, and web-sites.

*Situation assessment:* The process of gathering information to determine the public participation program and techniques that are feasible and most appropriate for the circumstances. The main purpose of a situation assessment is to identify the conditions necessary for a successful public participation process so that the sponsor agency and stakeholders are engaged in a common purpose.

*Sponsor agency:* The organization responsible for informing the public about and obtaining public input to influence a decision process. This includes the decision-makers within the organization and anybody else in the organization that could effect the decision or the public participation process.

*Stakeholders:* The people or communities who are affected by an agency's work, who have influence or power over it, or have an interest in its successful or unsuccessful conclusion. This includes people and communities with the power to either to block or advance an agency's work.