The nature of community participation in municipal public health planning in Queensland

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

March 2010
Abstract

Community participation is recognised as an important element of creating healthier communities and a key factor for the success of collaborative approaches to health and sustainability planning. The many benefits communities can gain from participating in health project planning and implementation include increasing awareness and knowledge in health; improving communication, network, and environment; making services more appropriate to needs; and putting pressure to governments to be more responsive to inequalities. The contemporary debate is not about whether or not community participation is important; rather, it is concerning the different interpretations of the nature participation and its ideal forms or levels. It is the aim of this study to clarify definitions and concepts fundamental to the understanding of community participation.

The literature often refers to hierarchies or continuums of participation, ranking different forms of participation from low level such as community consultation to higher levels such as community involvement, community representation to the highest level, community control. The problem of this depiction is that it can lead to the interpretation that only the topmost option, community control, is ideal and desirable, while in reality different forms of participation would be of value according to the nature and purpose of a project. For professionals dealing with community participation, the varying interpretations of the terminology used has often lead to confusions and frustrations. Efforts to better understand the nature and forms of participation suitable for different contexts are needed to allow for effective matching of community participation to project objectives and conditions.

The WHO Healthy City approach advocates community participation in local level public and environmental health planning and practices. In Queensland the Healthy Cities approach has been used to develop a model of municipal public health planning (MPHP) which was adopted by many local governments. This MPHP initiative has provided an opportunity to study community participation in practice in relation to local level public and environmental health planning and management.

This research investigates the conceptual issues, perceptions and influencing factors underpinning community participation in MPHP in Queensland. Beyond a literature review, in order to examine in-depth views and experience of MPHP stakeholders, this study employs qualitative research methods mainly involving key informant interviews.
and case studies. In total, the study conducted thirty-three in-depth semi-structured interviews, with key informants from three MPHP projects in Southeast and Central Queensland. Each project was initiated in 2001 or 2002, with the interviews conducted during 2003, 2005 and 2006.

Key discoveries provide insights into the essence of what community participation means to stakeholders and show that a range of levels can be appropriate to MPHP. Based on views and experience of key informants, community participation in MPHP is important for two reasons: to enhance decision-making and to foster support, enthusiasm and commitment to implement and sustain project activities beyond the planning stages. The main purpose of community participation strategies in MPHP is to engage stakeholders and mobilise a community voice in developing shared goals and joint actions. Participation in a MPHP context is about the **right** to “have a say” in decision-making, not to control it. This certainly does not support the frequently asserted notion that “the more community control the better the project is”.

The study concludes that MPHP should target community participation at the level of joint planning, with active consultation and advice from community members, services providers and other professionals that work in the local area. The MPHP process should contain mechanisms which allow for two-way communication and cooperative arrangements with stakeholders in all stages of development. Mechanisms found to be useful for this and in facilitating community representation are discussion forums, stakeholder working groups and collaborative steering committees.

The study reveals a number of barriers and success factors associated with MPHP. It highlights the importance of leadership, and the maintenance of this leadership, among the success factors. It also points out the many threats to project sustainability, particularly the vulnerability caused by the loss of key political and organisational champions and the lack of funding and commitment to take the project from planning through to and throughout the implementation stage.

This research confirms that community participation is complex and that community control should not be considered the only or ideal form of meaningful participation. The findings of this study clarify conceptual issues concerning community participation not only useful to professionals involved in MPHP in Queensland, but also to many of those who are working in government and non-government projects requiring community participation.
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signed

Zoë K Murray
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Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Griffith University for support given throughout the research and thesis writing process. Thanks go to both the Griffith School of Environment, the element within which I was enrolled to complete the thesis, and the School of Public Health, the element within which I worked. I would like to particularly recognise my supervisors, Professor Cordia Chu and Dr Peter Davey for introducing me to Healthy Cities and municipal public health planning and for the guidance given in the undertaking and the writing up of this research. I am also grateful to Jennifer Beale for her editorial advice and to my husband, Steven, for assisting with type setting.

I would also like to acknowledge the time and contribution the interviewees in this research gave. Thank you - with out you taking the time to sit down and discuss your experiences and views with me I would not have been able to conduct this research.

To my family I appreciate the belief you had in me. To my much loved children, while your births created additional priorities and time demands, they provided the motivation to role model ensuing and achieving a goal.