Monitoring Social Participation: implementing the C.L.E.A.R model

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Introduction

The C.L.E.A.R tool develops from a framework for understanding social participation which argues that participation is most successful where citizens:

C an do – that is, have the resources and knowledge to participate;

L ike to – that is, have a sense of attachment that reinforces participation;

E nabled to – that is, are provided with the opportunity for participation;

A sked to – that is, are mobilised by official bodies or voluntary groups;

R esponded to – that is, see evidence that their views have been considered.

The C.L.E.A.R tool exists to help government organisations or civil society organisations to better understand social participation in their communities or among their stakeholders. It is a diagnostic tool: one which helps public bodies to identify particular strengths and problems with participation in their localities and, subsequently, to consider more comprehensive strategies for enhancing public participation. This tool was refined during work with the Council of Europe that tested the audit framework in work conducted by 23 municipalities in five countries during 2006 and eventually adopted the framework as a support for participation policies. Since then the C.L.E.A.R framework has been applied in other work in Australia and Europe. Part one of this document outlines the basic features of the C.L.E.A.R tool. Part two provides guidelines on using the tool, stressing that as an audit tool it helps to identify issues of concern and areas that might need to be addressed in order to improve practice. In short its role is more for diagnosis than measurement. The third section provides a more detailed account of how to use the tool. The final section identifies how to think about policy responses to any challenges

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2 For more background papers and links see
or problems identified when using the tool, concluding with a discussion of the prospects for engaging citizens in policymaking to a greater degree.

1. A framework for monitoring social participation

In this section the five elements of the C.L.E.A.R framework are explored. Each element reflects a strongly supported set of research findings on how citizens engage and what limits their engagement.

*Can do*

When people have the appropriate skills and resources, they are more able to participate. These skills range from the ability and confidence to speak in public or write letters to the capacity to organize events and encourage others of similar mind to support initiatives. They also include access to resources that facilitate such activities (ranging from photocopying facilities through to internet access, etc.). These skills and resources are much more commonly found among the better-educated and better-employed sections of the population: those of higher socio-economic status. However, none of the requisite skills and resources is exclusively the property of these higher status groups, some skills rest more on an individual’s resources: their education or, more broadly, their *capacity for engagement*. The resources available to communities are also affected by the facilities and capacities available, but it is possible for public, voluntary, or community bodies to intervene to make up for any socio-economic limitations.

*Like to*

‘Like to’ rests on the idea that people’s felt sense of being part of something encourages them to engage. If you feel a part of something, then you are more willing to engage; if you feel excluded or sense that you are not welcome, you may decide not to participate. If participation is seen as just for older people or for men, then others may not feel comfortable or able to join in. A sense of trust, connection and linked networks can, according to the well-known social capital argument\(^3\), enable people to work together and cooperate more effectively. Sense of community can be a strong motivator for participation, but given the inherent diversity in many communities then, conversely, an absence of identity or a sense of being an outsider can militate against participation.

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‘Enabled to’, as a factor in participation, is premised on the research observation that most participation is facilitated by groups or organizations. Political participation in isolation is more difficult and less sustainable (unless an individual is highly motivated) than the mutually reinforcing engagement of contact through groups and networks. Research shows that the existence of networks, groups and civic infrastructure which can support participation and provide a route to decision makers is therefore vital to the vibrancy of participation. Where the right range and variety of groups exists, there tends to be more participation. Civic organisations that seek to promote participation - ‘umbrella’ organizations- can play a particularly important role. They can help groups by providing networks of contacts and information, explain how to campaign and engage and facilitate access to the relevant decision makers.

‘Asked to’ builds on the findings of research that mobilization matters: people tend to become engaged more often, and more regularly, when they are asked to engage, and that engagement depends upon how they are approached. Mobilization can come from a range of sources, but the most powerful form is when those responsible for a decision ask others to engage with them in making the decision. The variety of participation options is important, because some people are more comfortable with some forms of engagement (such as a public meeting) while others would prefer, for example, to engage through on-line discussions. Some people want to talk about the experiences of their community or neighbourhood while others want to engage based on their knowledge as a user of a particular service. The nature of the ‘ask’ is important. Participation can be mobilized by the use of incentives (e.g. honoraria for service), through establishing a sense of obligation (as in the case of jury duty), or by offering bargains/exchanges (where participation is accompanied by action in response). The focus of the ‘ask’ is vital; it could be directed at a particular neighbourhood, or a larger cross-authority population. The sustainability of participation is also relevant: can the ‘ask’ be sustained, and will citizens keep...
responding? Who is being asked is another issue. There is a dilemma between developing ‘expert citizens’ and rotating/sampling involvement to get at ‘ordinary citizens’.

**Responded to**

‘Responded to’ captures the idea that for people to participate on a sustainable basis they have to believe that their involvement is making a difference, that it is achieving positive benefits. This factor is both the most obvious, but also the most difficult factor in enhancing political participation. Citizens’ attitudes in this area will both reflect their experience and the general tone of political culture. It is probably fair to say that in many established and new democracies the standing of politics and politicians is not that high among many citizens. People have complex ideas about how politics works and different “folk understandings” of why it is prone to failure. For people to participate they have to believe that they are going to be listened to and, if not always agreed with, will at least be in a position to see that their views have been taken into account.

2. **Guidelines for using C.L.E.A.R**

What is the role of the C.L.E.A.R framework? What kind of performance or audit tool is it? The C.L.E.A.R model is about recognizing that a variety of factors can drive participation. Its aim is to provide a diagnostic tool so that the factors constraining engagement among some groups and sections of society can be addressed.

Potential users of the tool include:

- Elected or appointed public officials
- Other public bodies that have an interest in sponsoring participation initiatives
- The organisations of civil society within a locality

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• Citizens interested in enhancing the participation opportunities within their localities

An important feature of the C.L.E.A.R framework is that its five factors are neither hierarchical nor sequential. The presence of one factor is not a precondition for others and effective participation does not necessarily depend on all of the components being present although, in an ideal world, they would be. Furthermore, the model does not attach a specific weight or importance to any particular factor: there is no assumed balance between the different factors that should be expected in any given locality or arena. Rather, the underlying assumption of the diagnostic tool is that it will serve two purposes:

1. It will help those conducting the diagnosis to identify and understand the balance of factors affecting participation in their localities

2. It will provide an opportunity for all those involved in a diagnosis to reflect upon the relative strengths and gaps in participation in their localities and to consider strategies for addressing these gaps.

C.L.E.A.R as a performance or audit tool is not a “dial” or “alarm bell”. It is more of a more a “tin-opener”. Performance indicators can provide different types of understanding. If something involves a relatively simple process then precise and unambiguous measurement can occur and the performance indicator can act like a dial; telling the reader exactly what the position is. A performance measure could also provide an “alarm bell”, pointing out the completely unacceptable behaviour is occurring. The C.L.E.A.R tool is unlikely to perform that role. However a third common use for performance indicators is as a “tin-opener” and that is where the strength of C.L.E.A.R lies. The emphasis here is on opening up an area to investigation and giving an opportunity to explore an issue in more depth. The complexity of the area and the contested nature of judgements about social participation mean that C.L.E.A.R is best suited to that tin-opener role.

The tool does not seek to provide standardised objective data that can be used to compare agencies or areas and reach some ranking or classification of different organisations or municipalities. The tool does not generate directly comparable information on participation that can be used by third parties to contrast or evaluate areas. The aim is to facilitate a process facilitates reflection and understanding of social participation among those who are most in a position to do something about it.

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3. Using the C.L.E.A.R tool

The tool works by posing a series of questions which those conducting the diagnosis seek to answer. The way in which these questions are asked and the people involved in answering them (government departments, local voluntary organisations, citizens’ groups, politicians, individual citizens and so on) will vary, as will the techniques that are employed (e.g. interviews with key stakeholders, surveys of citizens, focus groups of municipal employees and so on). The key point is that the tool is adaptable to local circumstances to enable interested parties to diagnose the strengths and limitations of publicly sponsored participation initiatives in their area, with a view to improving them.

For each of the five factors the tool provides a series of themes which have been elaborated into indicative questions (See Appendix A). These questions suggest the types of issues that users of the tool might want to investigate under that heading. Not all questions will be relevant in every context. Moreover, in different local or national contexts it may be necessary to adapt the questions to suit the type of data that is available. For example, some countries can provide very accurate statistical information about the socio-economic conditions of each locality. In others, it may be more appropriate to use especially collected information or even the informed judgments of local people. The tool is for self-diagnosis: the way in which the questions are developed, therefore, should suit local needs while remaining honest to the main themes that the tool is articulating. Similarly, it may be necessary to adapt the range of questions depending upon the types of respondents to which the tool is being addressed and the types of method being used.

Each user can design their own method to suit local needs. However, in implementing the tool, users should be sensitive to the following points:

- Use existing data sources where possible to keep down the costs of collecting information

- Some organisations may feel it is most appropriate to collect the information themselves, using their in-house expertise. Others may employ specialist consultants to collect and/or analyse the evidence on their behalf

- Some questions lend themselves to collecting quantitative information (e.g. those around skills). Others are more suited to more qualitative techniques such as interviews or focus groups. The precise mix will
depend upon the resources available to the organisation and the amount of effort they want to commit to the diagnosis.

- Who to involve in the audit process is a significant issue, it is important that the net is spread sufficiently widely to encourage appropriate learning

- Organisations may want, first of all, to undertake an initial diagnosis in-house, using a small team of officers or elected politicians, before extending the process to other stakeholders or focusing upon specific communities of geography or interest.

As the information is collected it is likely that particular problems and issues (as well as strengths) will present themselves. These are part of the diagnosis and will require action on the part of the organisation.

4. Responding to the investigative lessons from C.L.E.A.R

Getting people to participate is not a simple task. There are blocks that stem from lack of capacity to participate or a lack of engagement with organisations or issues. Long term measures can address these blocks, but building community capacity or a sense of citizenship are not challenges from which policy makers can expect easy or quick results. Deep-seated structural factors are clearly at work in shaping people’s resources and attitudes. But the behaviour of local politicians and managers is also important – and here change is more straight-forwardly in the hands of policy makers. If they ask people to participate in a committed and consistent manner and respond effectively to their participative inputs, they are far more likely to engage. The C.L.E.A.R model suggests to policy makers that, if they wish to increase local participation, the solution is to a substantial extent in their own hands: all of the key factors that drive up participation in a locality are open to their influence. They cannot always expect immediate results but policy levers are available to tackle every concern.

To illustrate this argument Table 1 uses evidence from the Participedia web site (http://participedia.net/en) and other sources. The web site provided details of participation practices from around the world and is available in multiple language translations including Portuguese. The University of Southampton was an international partner in the project to create the open-access research and practitioner platform called (other partners include University of British Columbia, Harvard University, Bremen University as well as practitioner organisations). The aim of the
illustration is not necessarily to promote that particular solution to the challenges of participation but to indicate that for every challenge it is usually possible to find some inspiration in terms of a response if the large-scale international experience on these matters is investigated.

**Concluding comment**

Engaging citizens in social participation is a complex task. The offer of participation can be there and sometimes citizens will take it up and sometimes they will not. The C.L.E.A.R framework is not premised on the empirical likelihood of extending participation to all or the normative desirability of achieving extensive participation. We know from research\(^8\) that there are reasons why citizens do not want to engage in civic or political life: lack of interest, no strong views on the issues under discussion, even a sense that others are better placed to make a decision or a dislike of conflict. But equally we know that citizens’ interest in engagement is not fixed and above all depends on signals sent out by public authorities. Analysis of surveys\(^9\) show that if you ask citizens if their interest would increase if the political or decision-making system was more open and fairly constructed a substantial proportion switch to wanting to engage more. Those same surveys show that if you ask people if they would get more engaged if the political system got even more unresponsive find a smaller, but still significant proportion, answer that they would. The C.L.E.A.R framework is about attracting citizens back to public decision-making for positive reasons - because barriers are removed and openness is enhanced - but it’s important that we should not forget ultimately what is at stake: the shared goal is trying to make democracy work in complex and challenging times. Failing to make progress on that goal carries costs.

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<th>Key factor</th>
<th>Policy Response</th>
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Table 1: Policy responses to C.L.E.A.R concerns
Community development, training and development and practical support through the provision of community centres and resources targeted at those groups or communities that need help to find their voice. When constructing consultation exercises a specific effort to engage hard-to-reach groups can be made.

**Example:** *The New Hampshire Public Conversations on Outdoor Recreation.* Operating through the University of New Hampshire and NH Listens the participation initiative recruited distinct groups of people through a database of local recreation departments, high schools, regional planning commissions, senior centres, health agencies, disability groups, and those working with new immigrant groups. In particular the database was used to pursue citizens that were less likely to engage in public deliberations on outdoor recreation, such as clients or constituents working with the elderly, youth, new immigrant groups, the physically disabled, and those working to connect health and recreation. Such contacts were sent information on the New Hampshire Public Conversations on Outdoor Recreation and were offered easy access to registration. Furthermore, members of NH Listens worked to gain participants by personally contacting the target groups from the database as well as the rest of the public. The goal was to recruit 120 participants. Eventually 171 citizens engaged in the event. For further details see: [http://participedia.net/en/cases/new-hampshire-public-conversations-outdoor-recreation-0](http://participedia.net/en/cases/new-hampshire-public-conversations-outdoor-recreation-0)

Build a sense of community or neighbourliness. People have to feel part of a community to be comfortable with participation; so strategies of building social or community cohesion may be an important part in creating the right environment for participation. Sometimes the challenge is just to stand back, as policy makers, and allow the space for a community to form and the willingness to engage with it.

**Example:** *A four day conference “The 1st Inuit Circumpolar Youth Symposium on the Inuit Language”* involved twenty Inuit youths representing four territories (Canada, Alaska, Greenland, and Russia. The symposium concluded with several ideas on how to incorporate the Inuit language into everyday life. The concern was expressed that governments where Inuit live often ignore Inuit interests. The young citizens deliberated on how to promote government policies regarding the Inuit language and promote Inuit interests within the countries and territories that they live. For more information: [http://participedia.net/en/cases/1st-inuit-youth-symposium-inuit-language](http://participedia.net/en/cases/1st-inuit-youth-symposium-inuit-language)
| Enabled to | Strong civic institutions can give the confidence to express their views. Investing in civic infrastructure and community networks, improving channels of communication is an important part of the policy agenda for municipalities committed to participation.  

**Example: Bicycle Activism (Bucharest, Romania)** In November 2005, the policy makers in Bucharest decided to ban cyclist circulation on the main arteries of the city, on grounds of public safety and accident prevention. There was an outcry among cyclists. They attend rallies but crucially built a sense of support through the use of social media. The number of blogs, sites and forums related to urban alternative transportation grew significantly and united a community. As a result there is organised platform for those citizens concerned for the cyclists that share common goals and interests. Their impact is to be seen by the continuing presence of bicycles in Bucharest. More information: [http://participedia.net/en/case/bicycle-activism-bucharest-romania](http://participedia.net/en/case/bicycle-activism-bucharest-romania) |
| Ask to | Public participation schemes that are diverse and reflexive provide the best option in terms of making the ‘ask’ factor work. Different groups will require different forms of mobilisation.  

**Example:** There are many democratic innovations and new ways of engaging described on the Participedia site. The initiatives are grouped under several headings: developments using social media, the use of referendums, deliberative forms of consultation from citizens’ juries to various forms of peoples’ forums, the co-production of public services, directly involving citizens about budgets and strategies.  

Extended discussion of these schemes is available in G. Smith *Beyond the Ballot Box* [http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/34527/1/Beyond_the_Ballot.pdf](http://eprints.soton.ac.uk/34527/1/Beyond_the_Ballot.pdf) |
Responded to

A public policy system that shows a capacity to respond - through specific outcomes, ongoing learning and feedback

Example: See the discussion of the difference between matched municipalities in a study by the author and colleagues. It shows that the impact of regular engagement, feedback and a willingness to be seen to be listening by public authorities does have a major effect on the construction of participation and political well-being in their communities. Places with similar social and economic histories and conditions have different participation profiles driven by the sense that communities have been respond to. The key challenge is in meeting the challenge of ‘responding to’ is sustaining a sense of engagement over the long run.


APPENDIX A: C.L.E.A.R QUESTIONS

Can do

Education: What are levels of education like in the locality? Have most people got basic education, or higher level qualifications? How does the picture differ for different groups of citizens – young people, older people, and minority groups? Employment and work: What is the social occupation make-up of the locality? What is the balance between different occupations – e.g. professional, skilled, semi or unskilled work, self-employment? What are the main employers in the area? Is there a problem of unemployment in the area? Is unemployment concentrated among particular parts of your community? Demography: What is the age profile of the population in the municipality? What proportion of the population belongs to an ethnic minority group? How many significant ethnic minority groups are there in the municipality (i.e. that the municipality recognises and addresses in its communications with citizens)? What languages are spoken in the locality? Are there other demographic factors that may be significant for participation (e.g. family structure, student concentration, commuters)? Resources: Do citizens have easy access to appropriate resources for political participation? For instance, are there
plenty of accessible meeting venues? Can citizens get access to computers, photocopiers or telephones to help them participate? Are these resources available to those who don’t have access to them through at work or at home? Do the local media support participation by providing information and communication channels (e.g. local TV, newspaper or radio)? Do citizens have time to participate? 

Skills/knowledge: Do citizens have the necessary skills for participating in political life (e.g. the ability to write letters speak in public, organise meetings etc)? Do citizens have the competence to utilise the resources in their community (e.g. to use computers, the Internet etc)? Which skill set is in short supply? Do some groups of citizens have more access to resources, and more skills to use them, than others?

**Like to**

*Identity:* What is the main focus of identity for people – the local neighbourhood, the town or city as a whole, or the region they live in? How well do people in the same neighbourhood know each other? Do citizens identify with the municipality? How attached are people to the area in which they live? How important are non-geographical sources of identity – like ethnic or cultural identity, social class, or ‘communities of interest’ (among young people, or gay people, or those with a particular interest – like sport)?

*Homogeneity:* How stable is the community – have people lived at the same address a long time or is there a lot of mobility? Does the community have a strong sense of history and tradition? To what extent is there a similarity of identity across the community (i.e. are people largely the same – and if not, where are the main cleavages)? Are values and priorities the same across the community – and if not, where are the major cleavages?

*Trust:* How much do citizens trust one another? Are people generally helpful to one another or do they tend to put self interest first? Is anti social behaviour a problem? How much do citizens trust the municipality to make decisions that are in the interest of the community as a whole? How much do citizens trust the national government to make decisions that are in the interest of the community as a whole?

*Citizenship:* Is there a strong community spirit that supports collective action? Do people feel a sense of responsibility towards the community? Are there groups or sections of the community that are likely to feel excluded? Is there a sense in the municipality that the voices of some groups are more legitimate than others?

**Enabled to**

*Types of civic organisation:* What sorts of organisations exist and are active in the locality (e.g. youth groups, environmental campaigns, social welfare organisations, parent-teacher associations, sports or hobby groups, ethnic associations, cultural
bodies)?  Is there a census of such bodies?  Which organisations have the most members?  Which have the most influence on municipal decision-making?  Is the range of groups sufficient to address the full range of political issues that citizens wish to engage in?  Activities: How active are civic organisations?  Are they increasing in number?  Is membership increasing?  Do such bodies seek to influence decisions at the municipal level, or get involved in running local services?  What are the main ways they do this?  Civic infrastructure:  Are there any ‘umbrella’ or coordinating agencies that exist specifically to support the development or growth of civic organisations in the area?  Do they have sufficient resources and capacities to reach out to a range of organisations?  What support does the municipality give to civic organisations (e.g. grants, premises or equipment, staff support, access to facilities, opportunities to meet decision-makers)?  What are the major weaknesses of the voluntary and community sector in the area?  Do the local media support the work of civic bodies (e.g. publicising their activities)?  Could the internet or social media be playing a part in stimulating participation?
As asked to

**Forms of participation:** How does the municipality seek to engage citizens in decision-making processes (e.g. surveys, consultations, focus groups, citizens’ juries or panels, regular forums)? Does the municipality seek to use the internet for citizen engagement (e.g. putting information online, online consultations or discussion forums, use of email or SMS texts)?

**Strategy:** Does the municipality have a strategy for engagement or are initiatives more piecemeal? Does the municipality collaborate with any other organisations in consulting or engaging the public? Are citizens offered incentives to participate (e.g. honoraria, gifts, IT equipment, service enhancements, discounts on charges)? Are participation activities normally held at official premises? Has the municipality experimented with unusual locations to encourage participation (e.g. citizens’ homes, schools, supermarkets)?

**Reach and diversity:** Are existing forms of engagement sufficient to reach all the different sections of the community (young/old, ethnic minority groups etc)? Are particular forms of participation used to reach specific citizen groups? Do decision-makers give higher priority to the findings of some forms of participation over others (e.g. those that produce quantitative preferences)?

As responded to

**Listening:** What are the procedures for ensuring that the citizen’s voice is considered in decision-making? What mechanisms are used to feed the results of particular consultation or participation initiatives into the decision-making process?

**Balance and prioritisation:** How are the views of citizens balanced against the opinions of professionals and elected members, especially where they diverge? How good are decision-makers at understanding and taking into account the views of citizens?

**Feedback and education:** How good is the municipality at explaining to citizens the reasons for a particular decision and the ways in which citizen views have been taken into account? To what extent do citizens understand and accept the decisions made by municipalities? What efforts is the municipality making to improve its communication with citizens? Does the municipality have a programme of citizen education in relation to participation? Does the municipality provide support to politicians and/or officers in learning how to respond more effectively to participation?
