Table 4: Participation Hardware/Software

WHAT'S BEEN GOOD	WHAT'S NOT BEEN SO GOOD
Hardware	
structure/mechanisms to allow input	dominated by more powerful stakeholders
formal decision making power (negotiated, equitable, flexible)	powerful cliques, within and without the group
	domination by powerful, articulate individuals
	overly bureaucratic style of meeting and decision-making, implementation
agreements on how to manage dissensus	lack of credibility/authority and participation from key decision-makers
	strong disagreements and competing ideologies/interests amongst member groups
	need for procedures and policies on every decision can take attention away from issue
agreements on how to manage the work of the group	no agenda, minutes documentation of work and decisions
agreements on how to make participation inclusive for all key stakeholder groups e.g. transportation, childcare, community development supports	large power imbalances between groups, no prior work to "level the playing field"
equitable representation, all key stakeholder groups	tokenism in representation by less powerful stakeholder groups no clarity on constituency base for stakeholder representation (who speaks for whom?)
small enough group for interpersonal dynamics to be resolved and tough discussions and decisions made	over-representation; too many groups participating, particularly too many professionals and bureaucrats
focus on policy changes	
clear, achievable goals	vague, unachievable goals
group is able to negotiate its own goals and work	goals, tasks, issues imposed from the "top," with pre-determined outcomes
	lack of evaluation/constructive feedback

(continued next page)

clear tasks, appropriate assignment to members of responsibility for tasks	territorialism, turf and resource fighting amongst member groups
	member groups not prepared to engage in decision-making, are not key stakeholders for the issue
	too task oriented, no time for group process
adequate access to necessary resources	funding tied to narrow, quantifiable "silos," rather than to partnership development
	externally imposed competition for resources (you shall participate or not receive your funding!)
user friendly meeting spaces, a "safe" space	
adequate time to establish norms necessary to reach equitable decisions and to complete tasks, good leadership skills	
non-vested facilitator to negotiate agreements between member groups	
structures based within, or building upon, existing ones; the wheel is not needlessly re-invented	
Software	
openness/honesty about personal and group agendas for participating	participants too quickly judgemental of ideas being proposed
	"politically correct" ideologies are mouthed uncritically
	too many people simply say "yes" to everything
meeting time spent on relationship development	no time devoted to articulating common vision, beliefs, values
recognition of group achievements	unrealistically imposed time-lines for progress
members well prepared on issue and for work of the group	
members willing to share information about their knowledge of the issues, and resources	lack of consideration for resources required by less powerful groups, and for equity in resource allocation among member groups

members prepared to take risks, interpersonally and on issues	issues become too personalised
members prepared to share feelings as well as thoughts	inappropriate sharing of feelings, using feelings to cover over real differences in analysis and understanding of issues
	groups send different members to each new meeting, weakening trust relations and reducing efficiency in decision-making
norms established for handling conflict constructively	consensus always the favoured way for handling disputes, when sometimes the majority should rule
skilled facilitators or members with facilitation experience to help surface and deal with hidden agendas/interests	
rotation of some group roles to avoid inner clique developing	
valuing of all group tasks to avoid some becoming higher in power than others	minority within group assume power positions
community development principles practiced within the group, and in outreach to less powerful, important stakeholder groups	imbalanced membership by gender, ethnoracial background, community vs. institution
decision-making structures arise from within the group	decision-making structures imposed from outside the group, or by more powerful, articulate members
attention placed on active listening, and developing respectful exchanges between members	style of group work may not fit well within bureaucratic "culture"
	too much jargon
members enthusiastic, open to difference and diversity	
members working from principles and a shared philosophy (ethical stance)	defeatism, cynicism expressed by some members
seeking, respecting and validating members' experiences, dreams and hopes	

These principles also surface a few areas that merit further discussion.

PROCESS/TASK BALANCING

> One difficulty that can arise is that of dealing with the professional (staff)/community (participant) power dynamic. Little time is usually budgeted for people simply getting to know each other, and to work through some of the historic distrusts that community members often have of professionals. In some cases the tables can be reversed; community members make unrealistic demands of some of the staff, not understanding the limitations under which staff work. Eager to build trust and prove themselves responsive to community demands, staff sometimes reached a "burn-out" in their work, a common occurrence in front-line community development jobs. At the same time, if too much time were spent on the process of getting to know each other and discuss the various types of activities that could be undertaken, community participation (which requires short-term successes) may begin to wane. The real skill may be striking the balance between process and action (Labonte and Edwards 1995).

This passage, from an interview with one of the Equity in Action locality groups in Ontario, Canada, identifies the pervasive tension between group "process" and group "action." Table 5 (below) identifies some of the tensions in the process/action dimension.

Table 5: Some Distinctions Between Process and Task Dynamics

PROCESS	ACTION
inwards-looking	outwards-looking
consensus oriented	majority oriented
general capacity building	specific resource or policy objective oriented
participants' emotional concerns	task accomplishment concerns
abstract concepts	specific activities
inclusive community building	exclusive community building
long term	short term
broad health determinants	narrow "doable" actions

As Table 4 identified, good participation has elements of both process and action. As much attention has to be given to peoples' emotional concerns and general capacity-building as to gaining specific resource or policy advantages. On the one hand, and as one wise community organiser once commented, "communities thrive in action but die in committee."

A process orientation, however, can sometimes lead to waning community participation, especially by more marginalised social groups. The process of discussion in the absence of specific decision-making or task allocation is more characteristic of the academic or bureaucratic culture than of a grassroots organising culture. On the other hand, a narrow emphasis on short-term doable tasks risks ignoring the necessity for changes in public policies that ultimately determine the possibility of smaller-scale, "doable" successes.

Part of the problem in managing process/task tensions in group work is the size of the group, and the commitment of individual members to the group. These were noted in Table 4, where participation waned when the group became too large, or when organisational representatives to the group kept changing. Agencies attempting to initiate participatory forums sometimes make the mistake of casting too wide a net in seeking institutional and community group representatives. While participation should be "inclusive," and health determinants, as we are told, "are everybody's business," everybody's business becomes nobody's business. A large inclusive group with changing membership may have people with little to contribute to the particular issue and whose presence prevents, rather than enables, decision-making. People working on public participation in environmental health issues note that:

- there is no "public," there are only "publics"
- for any decision, these publics consist of people who see themselves significantly affected
- people see themselves affected in a number of ways (direct threat, economic gain or loss, values, political philosophy)
- the size and composition of publics will vary for each decision
- the size of publics will increase with the controversy of the decision or issue
- the size of publics will increase as the decision-time draws nearer (PRAXIS 1988, V.2, p.26)

A useful way to consider who should participate is to review who are the key stakeholders for the particular program or policy decision. A key stakeholder is a person or group with one of the following characteristics:

1. someone with decision-making authority over the program or policy
2. someone significantly affected by the decision (this requires a judgement call over what "significantly" means, but this should serve as a screen to limit the size of the eventual group)
3. someone who can make a key contribution to decision resolution (they may possess knowledge resources or material resources, and knowledge in this case is both the formal knowledge of researchers and academics and the informal knowledge of community members)
4. someone otherwise able to prevent or enable decision (such as a specific lobby or "special interest" group).

A COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT APPROACH TO PARTICIPATION

Many of the statements in Table 4, allude to the importance of a community development approach to participation. The key elements of this approach, as identified by the Equity in Action locality projects in Ontario, Canada, include:

- listen and talk with people
- support people to design their own projects
- encourage people to teach each other
- be cooptable (adopt community groups' agendas)
- use unbureaucratic meeting and planning methods
- develop educational and training programs on participation
- commit to the "hard" way of participation that emphasises capacity-building
- commit to rapid implementation of the ideas people provide
- ensure participants help determine criteria for evaluation

There is a rich literature on community development practice that will not be recounted here, but exploring a few points from this brief synopsis is instructive.

First, encouraging people to teach one another is axiomatic in creating a more empowering approach to participation, both within the group and in policy work. It also helps to defuse the situation where some participants "assume" authority-style leadership positions that undermine the ability of other members to contribute:

LA CASA DONA JUANA: SUPPORTING PLURAL LEADERS

> In La Casa Dona Juana, a social space for Latin American women in Toronto, participants identify the different skills or "gifts" that individual members bring to the collective and to its activities. Women who are skilled in writing prepare the grants applications, and teach other women in the process. Women who are skilled in cooking take a leadership role in the collective kitchen, and pass skills on to other women during the process. Women who are skilled in budgeting plan the menus or purchases for the collective, again transferring their knowledge to other collective members. Women who are skilled in sewing techniques take leadership in the sewing collective. In the "outside" world, budgeting and grant-writing skills may be highly valued, and those who have them may be given more social status and power-over others. They may become identified, or identify themselves, as the "leaders."

But in La Casa Dona Juana, due partly to the feminist organising beliefs of the health and social service professionals who provided the space and resources to start it, budgeting and grants-writing are merely one set of social skills no more or less important than those involved in cooking, menu-planning or sewing. Leadership is seen as changing according to group needs, with different members taking on different leader roles; and the invitation to learn new leadership roles from one another is a standing agenda item.

Second, commitment to the "hard way" of public participation in policy work is very important. While the move to community participation by many governments is a health step towards a more civil society, it is not always clear whose interests are being served most. There is concern that participation is becoming a ritual, devoid of critical reflection on how it might be more or less empowering for the communities affected. In the end, bureaucrats become more empowered because they can say, "I've consulted with the community, therefore my conclusions have more politically correct weight." If these conclusions truly do benefit local community groups, this is not necessarily a bad outcome. However, this is not often the case.

Many local groups strive to attend most invitations to participate. They fear that, if they don't, they may miss what could be an opportunity to influence an important policy issue. Usually they are disappointed, because participatory meetings are often called without government people first being very clear on why they are inviting input, what the meetings will achieve, how they will use the input and provide feedback, what the scope of the discussion can be and whether, in fact, if there is a commitment to change. As one organiser put it: "If the government wants to talk, it must be prepared to make changes." As a general rule, and from the vantage of community groups, one might summarise the conditions for meaningful policy participation thus:

> Come to us when you have a question only we can answer.
> Tell us what our answer does to your thinking.
> Talk to us when you have something really important to say.

Policy experts need to spend time communicating clearly with community groups about how important (or unimportant) different participatory meetings might be, in order for local communities to determine whether they should spend their energies becoming involved. Local communities have limited human and economic resources, and must choose their participation opportunities carefully. This is particularly the case when the policy issues revolve primarily around service delivery or access. There, non-professional participation is hard to maintain and of questionable usefulness, both to the service providers and to the citizens. Rather, as one such project in Ontario, Canada, has learned, it is important that "...local agency representatives bring 'case stories' to committee meetings [to ensure] that the voices of the marginalised groups, though spoken second hand through agency workers, nonetheless have a presence in the planning process" (Labonte and Edwards 1995).

Because the policy process is often time-consuming and complex, policy-makers need to ensure that they are requesting community participation on significant policy issues, commit themselves with community development resources for participation, and provide groups with sufficient time to respond. Experience in Canada suggests that it often takes a year to organise marginalised groups around policy issues, such that they have undertaken their own local research, shared their own experiences of the effects of the policy under consideration and developed a response true to their own "voices." Too many demands for insignificant policy participation will lead to participation by professionals or paid staff only, those whose incomes or jobs give them the time and resources to "volunteer."

Also, there is the question of what it is we are asking the public to participate in, as another story elucidates:

> A health education coordinator, in the name of health promotion, received permission from her managers to convene a committee on housing and health with activists from housing rights groups. These groups wanted safer, better heated and ventilated, and more affordable housing. The health educator, agreeing politically with their concern and knowing that violence, dampness and poverty were "real" health issues, desired her unit to be more relevant to the issues expressed by these community groups.
>
> The housing and health committee met for a year, documenting with studies and literature reviews that the activists' concerns were legitimate. Recommendations were drafted and the health educator felt much better about her occupational role. The report was presented to her manager, who agreed with the literature review and with the studies, but nayed most of the recommendations as "too radical." The report went back to the committee. The recommendations were rewritten, watered down. This time the health educator's manager passed the report along, but his manager, while agreeing with the literature review and with the studies, nayed most of the watered down recommendations as "too radical."
>
> The report went back to the committee, which now suffered the absenteeism of many of the housing group activists. The recommendations were rewritten again in the deft style of "public health parenthood," platitudes "full of sound and fury but signifying nothing." (Everyone's against poverty; not everyone is against those economic structures that maintain the wealthy who create the poor.) This time the report made it all the way to City Council, where it was discussed for 90 seconds and unanimously passed, a victory for the health educator and her managers. But by this time the original committee was completely moribund, and the health educator was puzzling over what had gone wrong (Labonte 1993b).

The mistake here was confusing participation in a bureaucratic process with participation in a social change process. Bureaucratic processes are inherently conservatising, and the higher one goes in complex organisations the greater is the imperative to ensure that controversy is avoided, rather than created. With good intention, the health educator had wanted to engage in an activity that made everyone feel better about themselves, including her own desire to be relevant or useful in a larger project linking health with social justice. Instead, the question she should have been asking herself is "What activities are best suited to the end: Effecting political change in housing policy?" This requires a recognition that her organisational requirements for change differ from those for community groups and, particularly, for activist leaders within those groups.

This recognition would not deny her and her staff an important role in achieving the end, but would reconstruct it using a metaphor of a nutcracker, with the nut being the specific policy-issue at hand (e.g. safe, healthy, affordable housing). Persons within the organisation, in their role as legitimating professionals, provide the studies, creating a strong inner arm. Activist groups outside the organisation provide the stories and, in their more powerful role as citizens, posit the more politicised demands, and at the appropriate political level (e.g. City Council). Their concerns, buttressed by the concurrent internal validation made in the language of the organisation, give those empowered as decision-makers (politicians) less opportunity to refer the issue inwards for "more study," risking the conservatism illustrated by the story; the policy nut begins to crack.

Finally, in all of this work:

> The community developers are the links with the community. They deal with complex issues and take them to the community. They translate such issues into actions that are meaningful, at the same time encouraging and supporting residents to change their behaviours and influence government decision-making (Labonte and Edwards 1995).

Community development workers are the bridge between inwards-looking, process-oriented, support-building groups, and outwards-looking groups that target longer-term social change through policy participation. This takes particularly skilled workers who have "high levels of energy" and who can be "socially oriented sales people...who can see the human side of issues." Such staff need to be "independent and on the front line...their strength [lying in] their ability to work on the street and be lightening quick (Labonte and Edwards 1995)." The need for good facilitators or non-vested organisers was also emphasised in Table 4. In previous work with the participation "hardware"/"software" metaphor, others have suggested the importance of "firmware," the community developer or organiser who is able to bring groups to the table and negotiate a shared vision and agenda. This person's job is to listen to the concerns of key stakeholders, find a common language, identify a "superordinate goal"—a visionary goal larger than any one group's—and facilitate agreements and compromises amongst the partners.

MIDWIFING AN INTERORGANISATIONAL AGREEMENT

Another story serves to illustrate this process. Some years ago, I found myself in the middle of disagreements between heart health advocates, unions and management over a proposed ban on workplace smoking. Prior to legislating a ban, groups wished to negotiate an agreement that could form the base of a new by-law. The three different key stakeholder groups had different policy values. For the heart health coalition, the key values were:

- prolong life
- decrease disease
- promote heart healthy behaviours
- prevent exposure to environmental tobacco smoke (ETS)
- reduce smoking prevalence
- protect non-smokers' rights

For the management sector, the key values were:

- enhance productivity
- maintain workplace harmony
- minimise costs of smoking control program
- demonstrate a concern for workers' health, satisfaction and comfort

For the union, the key values were:

- enhance worker solidarity
- provide fair representation of all workers' interests
- maximise benefits for workers
- ensure a safe, healthy workplace
- increase workers' controls over the pace and demands of their work (workplace democracy)