

# Strengthening community participation in meeting UN Sustainable Development Goal 6 for water, sanitation and hygiene



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### **Image**

Phoebelyn Gullunan (2016) - *Wawa River in Rizal, Philippines*.

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**Strengthening community participation in meeting  
UN Sustainable Development Goal 6 for water, sanitation and hygiene**

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## Executive Summary

Australia is one of the 193 United Nations (UN) member country signatories to the United Nations' agenda for sustainable development, which proposed 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). One of these goals (SDG6), focuses on ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all, and was developed in response to a significant need to improve global health and quality of life from water-related death and diseases.

The SDG6 goal is comprised of eight targets, of which one focuses on the importance of 'community participation' (SDG6b) in recognition that communities can affect the long-term success and impact of water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) projects. Community participation is also a target to achieve the related UN SDGs for gender equity (SDG5.5) and urban planning (SDG11.3).

This discussion paper seeks to identify how effective community participation processes can contribute to attaining SDG6. It was prepared for national and local governments, aid agencies, and non-government organisations involved in community participation, SDGs and WaSH issues. It proposes expanding the ambition of community participation beyond the top-down indicator developed by the UN, which recognises participation based on the existence of established local policies and procedures for engagement.

To provide this guidance, a transdisciplinary review was undertaken by 12 researchers across The University of Queensland with backgrounds in community development, social science, public health, integrated water resources management, policy and systems thinking. The authors considered several frameworks for analysing forms of community participation, and also examined community participation approaches in 60 WaSH projects in Pacific Island countries to identify factors that facilitated or hindered effective participation.

From the investigation of the 60 WaSH projects, community participation approaches were found to have not been included in all the phases of the projects. Instead, participation was often inserted only during the problem identification stage and/or the later implementation stage. Community participation was rarely evaluated explicitly by the organisations responsible for implementing the project.

To describe these findings, Figure 1 presents the current approach to community participation. This Figure enables the identification of areas to maximise the participation benefits of WaSH projects in Pacific Island Countries and beyond. It reflects the benefits of early involvement by communities during the planning and delivery timeline to leverage meaningful participation in higher-order decisions. The target of SDG6b presents an opportunity to design policies and procedures that serve as a mechanism to engage communities at earlier points in the timeline – where the scope of decisions is greater.

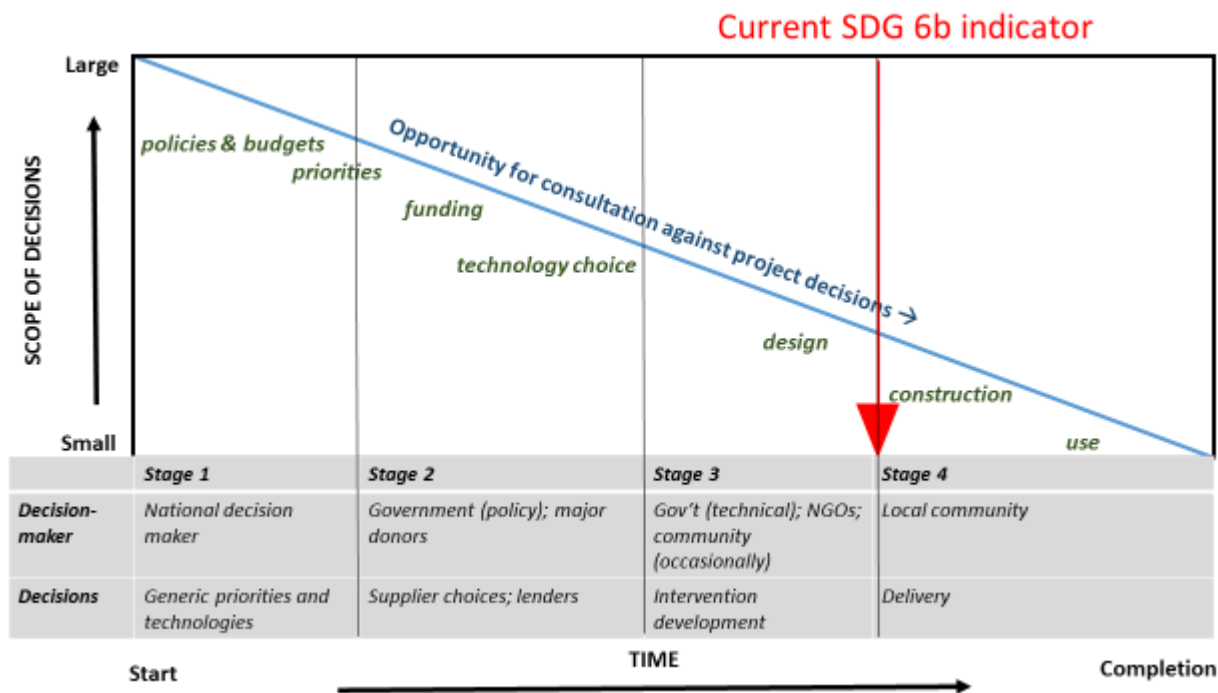


Figure 1: Traditional participation in water and sanitation supply chain (developed by the authors) (NB this figure is also reproduced as Figure 5)

This discussion paper presents four specific recommendations to improve the quality and impact of community participation in sustainable development, including in WaSH projects:

- **Recommendation 1:** Develop a common definition, framework and principles for community participation in WaSH.
- **Recommendation 2:** Ensure that the community participation approach for WaSH is designed to include five key elements: establishing an agreed participation objective; ensuring inclusiveness; providing information and capacity building; enabling spaces for dialogue; and ensuring transparency; and that it involves a 'bottom-up' approach.
- **Recommendation 3:** Provide meaningful community participation opportunities as early as possible in the development of WaSH projects.
- **Recommendation 4:** Establish robust indicators to monitor community participation in WaSH, and document participation from a community perspective to improve future efforts.



## Introduction

The United Nations (UN) set out an agenda for sustainable development towards 2030, entitled 'Transforming Our World' [1]. This agenda proposes 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs; see Figure 2) to be achieved between 2015 and 2030. This agenda was signed by 193 UN member countries, including Australia, in September 2015 [2].



Figure 2: The 17 Sustainable Development Goals of the United Nations [2]

One of the UN goals, SDG6, focuses on ensuring the availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all [2]. This was developed in response to a significant need: globally, 842,000 diarrhoea deaths are caused by inadequate drinking water and sanitation access, including 340,000 children aged under five [3]. In 2015, 663 million people worldwide lacked improved<sup>1</sup> drinking water sources. Additionally, 2.4 billion people lacked improved<sup>2</sup> sanitation facilities, with 946 million practising 'open defecation'<sup>3</sup> [4-6].

SDG6 is comprised of eight targets linked to action and implementation through which to achieve this goal. In an earlier publication by The University of Queensland [7], two of these targets were identified as key 'implementing' targets that influence the ability to attain the other targets. These were a target for cooperation, and a target specifically identifying the importance of community participation [1]. The community participation target recognises that community involvement is a key influence on the long-term sustainability of water, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) initiatives [8, 9].

This discussion paper seeks to identify how effective community participation can be achieved within the context of projects delivering drinking water, sanitation services, and hygiene and public health behavioural changes. To do this, a review of WaSH projects identified factors that facilitated or hindered effective participation. These projects were drawn from Pacific Island countries (PICs) in recognition of their low access rates to clean water and adequate sanitation water [3, 10]. It is anticipated that these findings can be extrapolated to additional country contexts, namely Australia (including remote Aboriginal communities) and Asia, where Australia has a strong influence on WaSH status through policy, funding and project implementation. Furthermore, community participation is also specified as a target beyond SDG6 –

<sup>1</sup> 'Improved water': Drinking water that is free of contamination [5].

<sup>2</sup> 'Improved sanitation': Facilities that separate humans from contact with their excreta [5].

<sup>3</sup> 'Open defecation': Disposal of human faeces in open spaces, including fields, forests, bushes, open bodies of water, and beaches [6].

in gender equity (SDG5.5) and urban planning (SDG11.3) [2]. The findings in this discussion paper are potentially transferable to these related contexts.

This discussion paper is targeted to audiences involved in community participatory approaches and the attainment of the SDGs, and specifically WaSH-focused aspects of SDG6. This includes government and aid agencies setting policy and assigning funding, and those implementing initiatives on-ground, including local government and non-government organisations.

### Research approach

A diverse team of 12 researchers was assembled from across The University of Queensland in an exploratory workshop that examined the interrelationships between the SDGs. The researchers represented disciplines of community development, social science, public health, integrated water resources management, Aboriginal health, policy and systems thinking in a transdisciplinary collaboration. Such a collaboration can enable an integrated perspective from both natural and social science that extends beyond the methods and understandings of specific disciplines [11]. This approach is particularly pertinent to the 'wicked' problem of sustainable development which can potentially and simultaneously address issues of social, economic and environmental challenges [12].

The researcher workshop commissioned a systematic search [13] and a scoping review [14] to identify community participation characteristics from existing frameworks, policies and manuals, and also to identify community participation in existing WaSH projects. A focus was placed on case studies of water and sanitation projects in PICs between 2005 and 2015. The findings from the search and review were critically analysed through a transdisciplinary and qualitative prism.

## Vanuatu: A case study of community participation in water decisions



In 2008, Vanuatu was progressing its new national water policy and recognised the need for community participation with government towards improved water resources management. However, the Government lacked methods for working with communities. On the island of Espiritu Santo, residents in informal settlements on a very poorly drained floodplain with a shallow water table had constructed their own homes without water and sanitation services. Most had pit toilets and home-dug wells, in close proximity (see photo on left). A collaboration of researchers and a non-government organisation, Live and Learn Environmental Education, conducted a capacity-building process with the settlement residents to prepare them to contribute to future land and water resource planning. As part of this process, the residents formed a group of community leaders and interested younger people to guide the process, then established a water quality testing system to build initial awareness. Within a series of capacity building workshops and activities, they conducted research regarding water issues for their communities. They collaboratively constructed a three-dimensional model of their local catchment (see photo on right), and identified the sources of water pollution and health risks related to their current settlements. They identified how their community could contribute to meeting the national water management objectives, especially in WaSH, through contributions to planning, collecting community and water quality data, building community awareness, participating on committees, improving toilets, and participating in implementation activities.

*Text by Professor Helen Ross, UQ School of Agriculture and Food Sciences; photos by Helen Ross and Terry Chan; team and project: Suzanne Hoverman, Ingrid de Lacy, Gina Tari, Terry Chan, Helen Ross, and Bronwyn Powell-International WaterCentre and Live and Learn Environmental Education, for the Australian Government*

## Background

One of the implementation targets (SDG6b) under the UN Sustainable Development Goal for water, sanitation and hygiene (SDG6) is focused on community participation, to ‘support and strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water and sanitation management’ [1].

It is likely that target SDG6b was developed in response to widespread critiques of water supply and sanitation projects with supply-driven approaches where the facilities had not been maintained or had been abandoned by the host communities after construction. In part, these problems occurred because the knowledge of experts and technology were prioritised over communities’ needs, culture, socioeconomic and political contexts [8, 9]. For example, a review of 17 communities in Papua New Guinea several years after the installation of toilets found that, while seven communities were using the installed toilets across most households, there were six communities in which only 20 percent of households were using the installed toilets [15].

### Definition of community participation

Community participation is a concept with varying definitions, according to different contexts and interpretations. In reference to human rights, participation is essential for democracy and people’s autonomy, agency and dignity [16], because it is a right of people to participate in matters affecting their future and development [17, 18]. In community development theories, participation – as opposed to tokenism – is a process by which local community members become part of the decision-making and planning processes of the projects, as well as part of the implementation, evaluation and adaptation phases [18]. In addition, participation has been defined as the existence of adequate mechanisms for people to be involved in decision-making [19]. In this sense, participation is most meaningful if applied through processes aimed at empowerment, which refers to developing and obtaining the skills and knowledge that are needed to make informed decisions [18].

The term ‘community participation’ does not have a standard definition. Indeed, the term ‘community’ can underplay the diversity of local residents and other affected stakeholders by implying shared identity and cooperation, despite social, economic and cultural differences of people or locations [20]. ‘Participation’ can also be mis-defined, often by incorrectly interchanging the term with ‘engagement’ – when participation is a precursor to true and meaningful engagement. As described by Aslin and Brown [21], engagement occurs following consultation, participation or other involvement, and is a later stage where participants are committed to a process. Furthermore, community participation can also be viewed either as ‘static’, where participation occurs at a specific moment in time, or ‘dynamic’, where participation varies and participant interaction can change over multiple interactions [22].

For this discussion paper, ‘community participation’ with regard to WaSH, takes its definition from the World Health Organisation, where community participation is ‘the active involvement of people from communities ... [involved] in analysis, decision-making, planning, and program implementation’ ([23] p.202).

## Evaluating community participation in UN Sustainable Development Goal 6

The indicator proposed by the UN to monitor the community participation target under SDG6 is the ‘proportion of local administrative units with established and operational policies and procedures for participation of local communities in water and sanitation management’ [24]. In establishing this indicator, there is an implicit assumption that all agencies and governments share a common definition regarding effective community participation. It also assumes that the existence of policies and procedures will lead to adequate implementation [25].

The existence of local policy to ensure community participation is important as a foundation and recognition of community involvement. The current UN indicator tends toward the old approach of a managerial or ‘top-down’ approach, which contrasts with the more recent shift to an emphasis on government and community engagement [20]. This newer ‘bottom-up’ approach acknowledges community-led processes of implementation and assessment that enhance community participation [25].

In response to the documented limitations of top-down community participation approaches [20, 25], including the SDG6b indicator, it is now more common to consider bottom-up or demand-driven strategies with particular focus on the participation of local users. The bottom-up approach seeks to enrich interventions by incorporating the communities’ local knowledge, skills and needs. The fundamental principle is that community participation increases the technical and economic sustainability of projects, as well as a sense of ownership by the community members [8, 26, 27]. In addition, the transfer of technology or services is not considered the ultimate goal; rather, the goal is positive development of the community – as the approach implicitly facilitates community building and development of empowerment through enhancing skills, such as leadership and decision-making [28].

This paper extends the possibilities for bottom-up community participation to ensure high-quality, early-application, long-term and broadly-inclusive participation on water, sanitation and hygiene initiatives. Evaluating this participation, though, can be difficult as various criteria are required to evaluate the effectiveness of diverse initiatives [29].

## Frameworks for community participation

This discussion paper expands on the variety of community participation approaches – both as frameworks and documented applications in Pacific Island Country WaSH projects – towards identifying effective aspects. Many frameworks describe the different forms of community participation. Some of the most commonly-referenced are the multilevel ‘ladder’ framework developed by Arnstein [30], the ‘participation ladder’ proposed by the United Kingdom’s Department for International Development (DFID) [31], the ‘participation spectrum’ of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) [32], and other typologies of participation [26, 33, 34].

Of these, the DFID [31] and IAP2 [32] are particularly relevant to development-oriented projects such as those that provide WaSH interventions. The levels of co-operation and partnership (in the DFID framework) and of collaboration (in the IAP2 framework) make explicit the need for sharing of decision-making power between the implementing organisations and the communities. These two frameworks clearly convey the principle of sharing power, and the shift towards considering communities as ‘subjects’ with agency, rather than ‘objects’. The frameworks are widely referenced as they provide a useful conceptual tool to identify the range of levels of participation that the projects could choose to meet when working with communities in which the core idea focuses on the degree of decision-making spaces provided, as well as the degree to which responsibility is shared.

## Community Participation Ladder

The DFID framework [31] outlines the need to change the paradigm of considering communities as objects upon which a project acts, to becoming engaged subjects, as well as understanding the implications of a project's methods in terms of sharing decision-making power. These considerations are placed on a 'ladder' that details five levels of participation – from coercion and compliance, to consultation, co-operation and ultimately to collective action, the highest level, as described in Figure 3. In the lower levels of the ladder, citizens are engaged but decision-making is made by others, while in the higher levels the participants are seen as subjects and are part of the decision-making processes. The highest levels of the ladder is reached when communities have full control of the decisions, and are able to act on their own, with little or no input from external stakeholders [31].

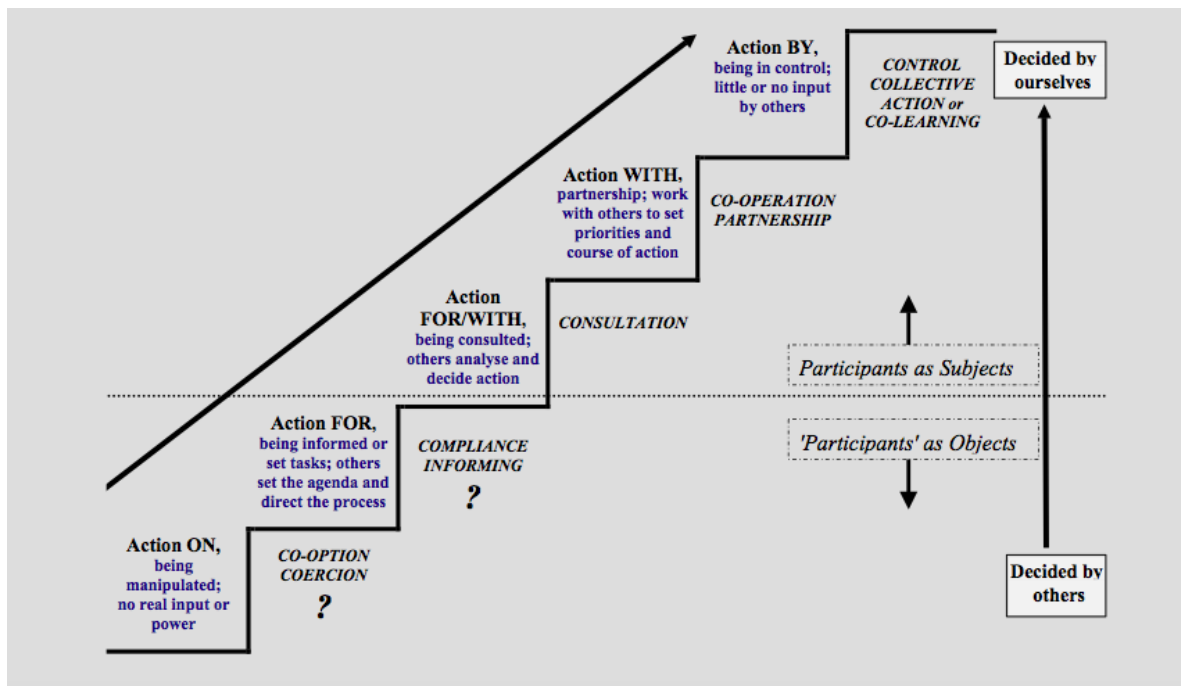


Figure 3: Community Participation Ladder [31]

## Spectrum of Public Participation

According to the IAP2 framework [32], public participation is the process of involving stakeholders affected by a decision within the decision-making process. It proposes a 'spectrum' of public participation, as displayed in Figure 4, with a continuum of five types of community participation from 'informing' to 'empowering', each associated with an increasing level of influence on the decision.

Crucially, the Spectrum highlights each category's necessary 'promise' to the community regarding their involvement in the decision-making process. As 'consultation', 'participation' and 'engagement' can be ambiguous terms, this promise seeks to ensure that all parties understand the amount and type of influence the community will have on various decisions, as well as ensure that promises made by project sponsors are consistent with the participatory processes they are undertaking. The context of the Spectrum is that public participation differs according to context, and that clear goals of participation must be set for each intervention. Therefore, the level of participation to be achieved depends on the goals, time frames, resources, and degrees of concern in the decision-making process [32].

		INCREASING IMPACT ON THE DECISION				
		INFORM	CONSULT	INVOLVE	COLLABORATE	EMPOWER
PUBLIC PARTICIPATION GOAL		To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions.	To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions.	To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered.	To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution.	To place final decision making in the hands of the public.
	PROMISE TO THE PUBLIC	We will keep you informed.	We will keep you informed, listen to and acknowledge concerns and aspirations, and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision. We will seek your feedback on drafts and proposals.	We will work with you to ensure that your concerns and aspirations are directly reflected in the alternatives developed and provide feedback on how public input influenced the decision.	We will work together with you to formulate solutions and incorporate your advice and recommendations into the decisions to the maximum extent possible.	We will implement what you decide.

Figure 4: Spectrum of Public Participation [32]

While offering a solid starting point for meaningful engagement, the Spectrum is not without its limitations. ‘Inform’ and ‘consult’ methods, which often equate to one-way flows of information, are included despite not incorporating true participation [35]. While useful in some circumstances (and important in conjunction with ‘collaborate’ and ‘empower’), these methods are often overly relied upon in stand-alone form, and do not allow communities to have influence on the outcome of decisions. Other commentators have described how, in practice, additional aspects to the IAP2 model are required to achieve effective participation. For example, the availability of both physical and metaphorical spaces for decision-making and allocating shared responsibilities do not automatically lead to meaningful community participation – particularly if engagement occurs very late in the project, or if information provided is incomplete or not impartial [33, 36, 37]. Instead, effective participatory approaches require that the communities have a clear understanding about the objectives, methods and goals of the interventions, to share their knowledge and opinions to shape the project according to their needs [16, 38]. A further requirement of meaningful participatory processes is the enhancement of technical and social skills for community members to contribute to high-level decision-making discussions [37, 39]. Additionally, these commentators describe the importance of considering the community as a heterogeneous entity, comprised of different stakeholders with diverse needs, interests and capabilities [37, 40, 41].

Overall, the IAP2 Spectrum is best considered a delineation of principles and participation possibilities, rather than a tool to evaluate levels of participation in active projects [42]. As countries seek to translate the policies created under SDG target 6b into meaningful local participation processes, tools such as the IAP2 Spectrum can provide a useful framework for understanding both the obligations and limitations of different forms of public participation as well as encouraging decision-makers to consider different ways to engage local communities. In response, this discussion paper presents complementary dimensions to the IAP2 Spectrum (in the Options section) to provide criteria and indicators to better characterise and analyse how community participation can be supported and strengthened for WaSH interventions.

### Limitations of community participation

Despite the value of frameworks, participatory approaches for community engagement can be limited by their application, assumptions and agents. Ross, Shaw et al. [43] provide a comprehensive review of these challenges, and caution against participation that is tokenistic, is overwhelming for the community, has unbalanced power relationships, or 'captures' specific community groups – which can all negatively affect the outcomes for a community. Furthermore, participation can be applied for reasons that are not community-centred. In some instances, participatory initiatives can be used to share blame for poor outcomes from complex social and environmental problems [20] or to constrain community requests and postpone controversial decisions [29].



## Review of community participation in WaSH projects in Pacific Island countries

To provide a focus to community participation in WaSH, this discussion paper examined the community participation aspects of 60 projects implemented across Pacific Island countries<sup>4</sup> (PICs; [44]) that involved the contribution of technologies and/or behaviours that improved that status of drinking water, sanitation facilities and/or health and hygiene.

PICs form a region for which SDG6's focus on WaSH is pertinent. This region is comprised of small island developing states with a combined population of 9.9 million [44]. It is estimated that 54% of diarrhoea cases in the PICs are attributable to unsafe water, inadequate sanitation and poor hygiene, causing approximately 1000 child deaths per year from diarrhoeal disease – particularly in Kiribati, Nauru and Papua New Guinea (PNG) [45]. Improved water sources are accessible to 52% of the PIC population, with this statistic heavily influenced by PNG, which has 70% of the region's population, and for which less than 40% of the local population can access improved water [3, 10]. In terms of sanitation, 31% of the PIC population has access to improved sanitation, falling to 21% in the rural areas [3]. For context, the status of WaSH in PNG and the Solomon Islands are compared with two South East Asian countries (Indonesia and the Philippines) and Australia in Table 1.

Table 1: Access to 'improved' drinking water and sanitation in the Asia Pacific region (selected countries) [10]

Criteria	Indonesia	The Philippines	PNG	Solomon Islands	Australia
% population with improved water supply (2014)	87	92	40	81	100
% population with access to improved sanitation facilities (2014)	61	73	19	30	100

To understand the extent, type and quality of community participation that has occurred in WaSH projects in PICs, a review of literature and information was conducted. It identified eight reports and other documents published between 2005 and 2015, which described a total of 60 projects. Of these, 24 projects focused broadly on WaSH, and the remainder on specific water, sanitation or hygiene projects [15, 46-52]. The majority of the projects described were in PNG (33), followed by the Solomon Islands (13) and Vanuatu (7). The majority of the projects (53) were based in rural areas. The objectives of the 60 projects included improving health and wellbeing; reducing morbidity and mortality associated with diarrhoea through water and sanitation facilities; and improving hygiene practices. Some projects sought to achieve this by increasing the awareness about the importance of sanitation, increasing understanding of design, operation and maintenance of technology, as well as improving technology and introducing practices to improve protection of environmental resources and livelihoods. The funding and implementation of these projects varied across local governments, non-government organisations and international organisations. The WaSH interventions included technological interventions for drinking water, sanitation and hygiene improvements, and behavioural interventions for hygiene improvement. Projects were evaluated at different stages, with much occurring post-implementation. In some cases, this evaluation occurred several years after implementation to assess the longevity of project impact. The evaluation criteria applied to the reported projects were diverse but did not specifically mention community participation [15, 46-52].

<sup>4</sup> Pacific Island Countries include the Cook Islands, the Federated States of Micronesia, Fiji, Kiribati, Nauru, Niue, Palau, Papua New Guinea, the Marshall Islands, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and Vanuatu [44].

Some community participation aspects were documented in the 60 WaSH projects in the PICs. From these, both 'facilitating' and 'hindering' factors towards community participation were extracted and are represented in Table 2. The facilitating factors for community participation included the intentional application of inclusive processes to engage the community members by staff with facilitation skills to enable community empowerment. These skills allowed for the adequate preparation and presentation of the information as well as to sensitively address beliefs and taboos associated with WaSH issues. Making the costs and benefits explicit was also a facilitating factor that could influence technology adoption and sustained use. For example, in a sanitation project in Vanuatu, community members identified that they had more time to spend in their gardens and more produce to sell as a result of the provision of water supply. A project in Fiji identified that saving water was the greater motivator to implement composting toilets due to cost savings and water scarcity challenges. In the Solomon Islands, there were reports of decreasing diarrhoea as a result of changing practices in hygiene and sanitation. Enabling participation by different members of the community, ensuring gender diversity and considering local cultural aspects were effective in increasing community participation. For example, a project in the Solomon Islands adjusted the training schedule and location to increase participation by local women. A further facilitating factor in increasing community participation was education and training. Providing education was found to increase awareness and motivation to bring changes and sustain them, including the use and maintenance of technology. Capacity building provided both engagement skills as well as practical skills to select, construct and maintain the WaSH interventions [15, 46-52].

In terms of factors that hindered community participation, the WaSH projects in the PICs described undemocratic and conflicting engagement processes. These factors included a perceived lack of coordination among different non-government organisation (NGO) projects. For example, a sanitation project in Tonga received contradictory messages regarding technical solutions and incentives. The understanding of WaSH options was confusing for local residents when they differed from previous interventions. For example, a Tuvaluan community was reluctant to adopt dry sanitation due to the strong emphasis placed by previous projects on the importance of water in toilets to ensure hygiene. These contradictions generated the perception that technology decisions could only be made by the implementing organisations. Furthermore, a lack of consideration of diverse stakeholders in decision-making and training also appeared to hinder participation.

Participation was also limited when communities perceived that the implementing organisations owned the project or infrastructure. For example, a Vanuatu community's role was limited to providing labour for project construction while the implementing NGO was perceived to make the major decisions – and thus appeared to own the project. Insufficient funding, materials and time also limited participation. Other examples of hindrance included insufficient training for community members on WaSH technologies, which was often provided in central locations that could only be attended by select community members. Where there was a requirement for community members to maintain projects after construction, this risked conflicting with community members' daily work and activities. Finally, participation was limited by unfulfilled requests from community members for post-construction technical assistance in their villages [15, 46-52].

Table 2: Factors that facilitated and hindered community participation in Pacific Island country WaSH projects (analysis by authors)

Facilitating factors	Hindering factors
<p>Inclusive processes:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use of participatory approaches</li> <li>• Project staff with skills in facilitation and participatory approaches</li> </ul> <p>Explicit costs and benefits:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Impact and potential benefit of the project perceived by the community (e.g. health, cost and wellbeing)</li> </ul> <p>Diverse stakeholder involvement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Involvement of different community members</li> <li>• Gender and cultural considerations</li> <li>• Community-established plans and goals to increase sense of ownership</li> </ul> <p>Education and capacity-building:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Education sessions provided by implementing organisation before construction of infrastructure</li> <li>• Capacity building to build engagement skills of community members</li> </ul>	<p>Undemocratic and conflicting engagement:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lack of coordination among different NGOs with different approaches and contradictory messages</li> <li>• Insufficient participation, with training and awareness sessions provided for only a small number of community members</li> <li>• Poor representativeness, with lack of inclusion of certain community groups, e.g. the elderly</li> <li>• Lack of knowledge about participatory processes and commitment to apply those by project staff</li> <li>• Negative perceptions of participatory approaches based on experience from previous projects</li> </ul> <p>Lack of ownership:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception that outside organisations/government own the project/ infrastructure</li> </ul> <p>Insufficient resources:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Limited time available for the implementation of projects</li> <li>• Lack of funding and materials for communities to implement plans</li> <li>• Increase in workload and responsibilities to community members</li> <li>• Lack of funding and resources to support transport to, and communication with, isolated villages</li> <li>• Lack of post-training follow-up and support in villages</li> </ul>

From the investigation of the 60 projects, it appeared that community participation approaches were not included in all the phases of the projects: participation was not fully embedded in each stage, and was often inserted only during the problem identification and later implementation stages. In the majority of the projects, the main participatory role offered to community members was to provide construction labour and to attend training regarding the maintenance of the WaSH technologies.

The findings of this analysis of recent WaSH projects in PICs indicates that community participation activities were not a specific focus of any of the project plans, nor subject to explicit evaluation. Instead, data were collected in relation to water and sanitation facilities, and education and awareness materials [46]. This approach is more typical of a ‘service delivery’ approach to WaSH projects, rather than their potential to foster a collaborative people-centred approach, in which community members share their experiences and adapt the project activities to meet community needs, with the support of the project team [53].

Facilitating effective community participation can increase the uptake and impact – and longevity of that impact – for community WaSH interventions in PICs, as well as potential in other countries. For that reason, the community participation focus of SDG6b serves to emphasise this benefit. This discussion paper expands on this focus, to increase the potential benefits.

## Options for strengthening community participation

This discussion paper aims to ensure that UN SDG6b target to ‘support and strengthen the participation of communities’ [2] is effectively applied when seeking to improve the status of water, sanitation and hygiene. To do this, three options are outlined: (i) maintaining business as usual; (ii) applying an existing and available framework for participation; and (iii) enhancing and tailoring an existing participation approach.

### Option 1: Maintain Business as Usual

This option proposes that WaSH projects continue to proceed in the current approach. In doing so, it appears that community participation is not an explicit criteria in the project design, delivery nor evaluation – although may be implicitly included. This option risks low community adoption of the WaSH intervention projects (both technology and behaviours) and a potentially short-term longevity and benefits of the intervention.

### Option 2: Apply an existing community participation framework

Frameworks for community participation have been developed and tested, with the IAP2 framework being well-known and adopted by WaSH practitioners. However, as detailed in the Background section, the DFID, IAP2 and other frameworks bring limitations so should ideally be adapted for each application for the specific population, location and WaSH priorities.

### Option 3: Enhance and tailor an existing community participation approach

An enhanced and tailored version of the IAP2 or DFID frameworks could maximise the community participation benefits of WaSH interventions in the PICs. To characterise, analyse and evaluate best practice community participation, elements of participation were drawn from existing manuals and reports. This analysis clarified both the ‘traditional’ approach to community participation, as well as the ‘ideal’ approach of maximise community participation opportunities as early as possible in the development of WaSH projects. The authors developed Figure 5, below, to describe the limitations of the traditional approach, and display opportunities for a more ideal approach.

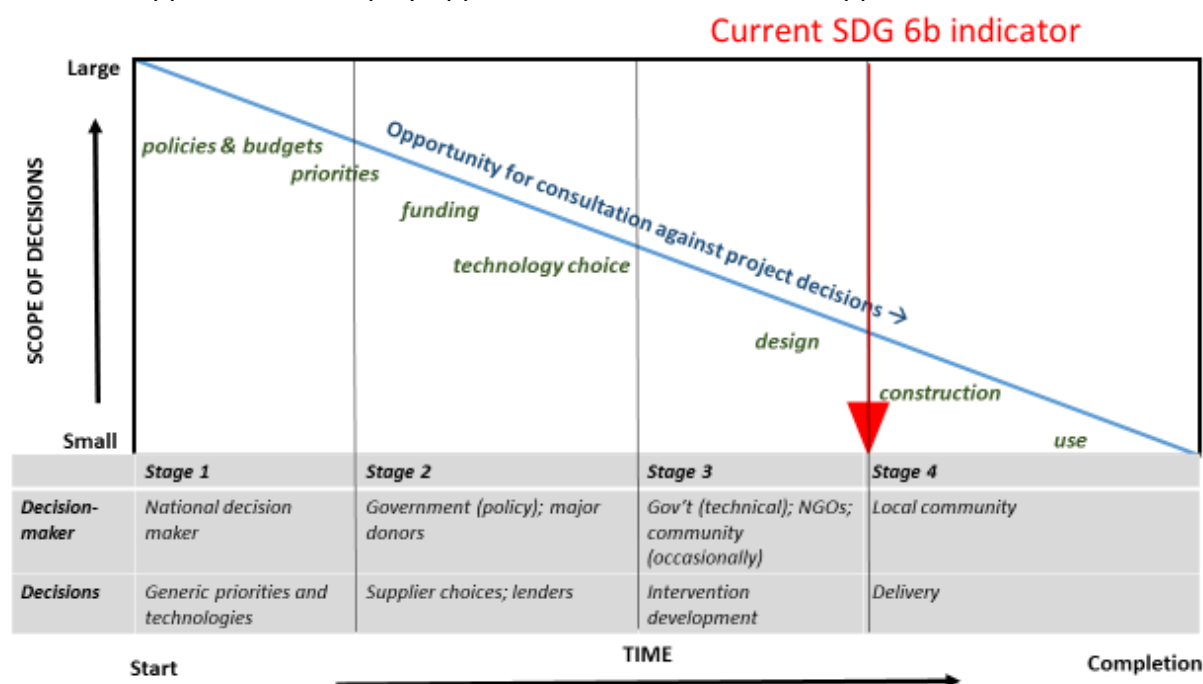


Figure 5: Traditional participation in water and sanitation supply chain (developed by the authors)

As displayed in Figure 5, there are four general stages during WaSH project development timeline from start to completion, and the decision maker and decisions often differ with each stage. The scope of decisions to be influenced reduces over the project timeline. Traditionally, the local community is engaged very late in the WaSH project development, and the scope of project decisions that the community can influence at that stage are very small – such as involvement in construction and subsequent use. The current location of the SDG6b indicator, which proposes that community participation is evaluated based on the existence of local policies requiring it, is situated in this Figure at the final stage. This reinforces the traditional approach decision-making opportunities offered to the community in many WaSH projects are of during the later stage, and with relatively low impact on the project scope. If community participation continues to occur predominantly towards the end of the timeline, and while the target of SDG6b evaluates this participation based on the existence of local policies, such participation risks being tokenistic and unlikely to contribute to the systemic change needed to meet the goal of SDG6. Figure 5 also enables to identification of the ideal approach, by displaying the positive influence if community participation processes for WaSH projects occur earlier during the planning stages and leverage meaningful participation in higher-order decisions regarding WaSH projects.

In addition to this timeline and clarification of community participation approaches, the review and search identified five key elements to promote participation of local communities during WaSH projects in the PICs:

1. Clear participation objective;
2. Inclusiveness;
3. Education, information and capacity building;
4. Spaces for dialogue;
5. Transparency.

These five elements are described in further detail below. From these, evaluation indicators can be developed.

#### Clear participation objective

A participation objective refers to the forms of participation sought by the implementing organisations, from consultation to empowerment. Community participation objectives can also differ on the outcome sought – such as to provide input to the community, to gather input from the community, or to build active and connected communities [29]. If the participation objective promotes permanent involvement of the community during all the stages of the WaSH intervention, this can provide a process towards project ownership and sustainability [18, 54-56].

Aspects to consider in developing the participation objectives are the validity of the participation – to ensure that the outputs resulting from the participation initiatives are reflective of the community input [22]. Additionally, the possible scope of the participation outputs needs to be clarified, to adequately manage the expectations of community members regarding their input and influence [29].

The participation objectives and approaches can be developed based on the desired outcome from the participation, rather than risk over-engaging communities [29]. These options are described in Figure 6, which was developed by the authors to describe the value that early interaction opportunities ('involvement') of community in establishing higher participation. This top right quadrant identifies the maximum possibility for engaged and influential community participation in decision-making.

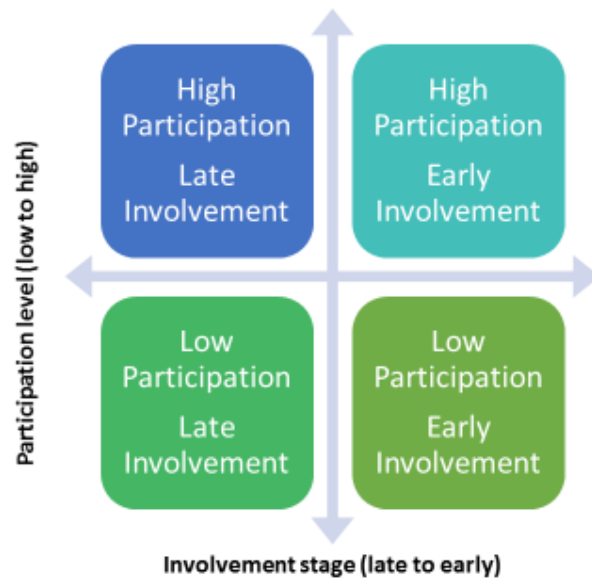


Figure 6: Options for water and sanitation participation (developed by the authors)

In the 60 PIC projects examined, the two major trends identified for participation objectives and approaches were co-opting and informing (involving communities through technology adoption or construction) and collaborating (active participation in awareness programs). If plotted on Figure 6, the majority of the approaches would be located on the lower end of the participation spectrum, with limited processes of inclusion and involvement, and implementing organisations relying on information provision and consultation.

### Inclusiveness

Inclusivity is a key element to promote meaningful participatory approaches, ensuring the engagement processes are open to all interests and viewpoints, and involving relevant members of society, including women (including childcare, where needed), all age groups, language groups (including translators, where needed), and social minorities [20, 29, 37, 57]. This element recognises that communities are heterogeneous groups with inherent hierarchies and patterns of inequalities, interests, rights and needs. Therefore, participatory processes are required that involve primary stakeholders or direct beneficiaries at the formulation stage of the project [19, 58].

Processes to achieve inclusivity should also ideally identify the diversity of minorities and marginalised groups, as well as measures to address discriminatory behaviours and conflicts [16, 39, 57]. It is noted that this broad engagement can be resource- and time-intensive [59].

A key inclusion aspect in WaSH-related community participation is gender: women are often the primary collectors, transporters and users of water but their views and needs are often not represented in the decision-making processes [55, 60-62]. Indeed, 'gender mainstreaming' is considered a pre-requisite for UN engagement – including on water projects – where it is defined as:

a strategy for making the concerns and experiences of women and men an integral dimension of the design, implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies and programmes in all political, economic and societal spheres so that women and men benefit equally, and inequality is not perpetuated. (UN [63], referring to A/52/3).

In seeking gender mainstreaming, women's inclusion needs to ensure political participation, rather than merely logistical participation, to avoid an increased workload for the female participants [56].

In the 60 WaSH projects examined in this paper, facilitating aspects to achieve inclusive community participation included: conducting separate consultation with female community members; involving illiterate community members in the design of visual communication tools; and involving local women in both projects in construction of infrastructure ('co-opting'), and as health and sanitation promoters ('collaborating').

However, some processes also occurred in the 60 projects that limited community inclusion. These included implementing organisations prioritising consultation with local government and community leaders over direct beneficiaries, which potentially overlooked the needs and priorities of the diversity of community members; a pre-existing prejudice held by community members against female technical specialists in a Vanuatu project, as technical knowledge was considered a male domain [64]; and dividing some projects by traditional gender roles (e.g. infrastructure building versus catering) [15, 46-52].

#### Education, information and capacity building

Participation has been observed to increase through capacity-building training and access to knowledge [37, 39, 55, 56, 65]. Decision-making is ideally based on credible information, sourced from scientific, local and traditional knowledge, and shared broadly [29, 66]. Such information can be provided in a format accessible to those with low literacy, in isolated locations, and from minority groups. In addition, participation in decision-making may require capacity-building to increase skills and sense of agency in participants to adequately participate. Hovmand [22] viewed capacity-building within a community as a long-term goal, and that an effective process can move communities along a continuum of participation from being a passive source of information to being actively mobilised over the timeline of a project.

In the 60 PIC projects examined, access to information was typically related to education and awareness programs, where experts provide information, activities and community sessions. For example, a project in Kiribati focused the early sessions on the water cycle, prior to describing composting toilets, to better establish the links between water, sanitation and health. This project was identified as effective as it incorporated local knowledge and motivations behind hygiene behaviours of everyday life. Capacity building in the 60 projects was provided in various ways, including through workshops and hands-on training for communities, and through the construction and maintenance of infrastructure. The objective of such training was often to develop skills in community members to adopt and replicate the construction of systems in their villages. An example is a sanitation project in Kiribati that conducted a training that included three days of theory sessions and seven field days for construction of composting toilets.

#### Spaces for dialogue

Community participation can be enhanced by providing metaphorical and physical spaces for dialogue between the communities and implementing organisations, as well as between the members of the community themselves [18]. Often, these spaces for dialogue facilitate constructive engagement between different stakeholder groups that would not otherwise occur, due to differences in resources, power and status [67]. This created space can provide mutual understanding for all those involved [57, 65]. Ideally, community members work with the implementing organisation to identify their target issues from an early stage, and work collaboratively towards solutions to ensure involvement in decision-making processes [31, 32, 68]. The UN recommends that providing spaces for participation from the beginning of projects can engage communities in strategic decisions, and that these opportunities should be both formal (e.g. referendums or public inquiries) and informal (e.g. community forums) [16].

Of the 60 featured projects studied, providing spaces for dialogue influenced some project success, with one Fijian project reporting that community members were more likely to express their needs and ask questions about sanitation in informal 'spaces', such as meal times and small group work, than during formal training.

## Transparency

A final key element of meaningful community participation is transparency, which is related to the quality, timing and comprehensiveness of the information provided to the communities. Transparency can also encompass the clarification of expectations for community members regarding their potential benefits and scope of influence on the project [29, 39]. The UN recommends that information is guided by the principle of maximum disclosure [16, 57], including disclosure of expected contributions from the community, and the cost and benefits of operation and maintenance of WaSH systems [69-71].

In the 60 projects studied, transparency appeared to increase in projects that enabled the communities set their own goals and responsibilities. Where a transparent approach was established concerning finance, this increased participation. In a PNG project, communities were made aware that high-functioning gravity-fed systems had a clear process for collecting tariffs for operation and maintenance of the water system, and participation increased due to this improved understanding of the financial benefits of the installed technology.



## Recommendations

This discussion paper has outlined the importance of the community participation target (SDG6b) within the UN Sustainable Development Goals [2] to achieve long-term improvements in water, sanitation and hygiene (SDG6). Sixty WaSH projects in Pacific Island Countries were analysed regarding their processes and impact of community participation. This section presents four specific recommendations, based on the findings from the PICs and with relevance for application beyond that region.

### Recommendation 1: Develop a common definition, framework and principles for community participation in WaSH

The application, resourcing and understanding of community participation processes in decision making are varied and produce various levels of success in the projects studied. The ambiguous nature of the participation concept, and the various level of application of the concept, was evident in the projects analysed. Additionally, the indicator proposed by the UN to monitor the SDG6b target assumes a common definition and adopts a top-down approach. A clear framework and principles of participation is required to enable policies and procedures for tangible and meaningful participation processes at the local community level.

### Recommendation 2: Ensure that the community participation for WaSH is designed with five key elements, and involves a 'bottom-up' approach

Some of the key elements that shape meaningful community participatory approaches include, but are not limited to, a clear objective, inclusion, access to information and capacity building, spaces for dialogue and transparency. The majority of projects reviewed in this discussion paper implemented a 'passive' and limited form of participation through top-down management, predetermined interventions and a service delivery perspective that limited the involvement of community members in significant decision making. For some projects, this approach also limited the adoption of practices and management of water and sanitation technologies.

### Recommendation 3: Provide meaningful community participation opportunities as early as possible

Earlier community participation processes can leverage meaningful participation in higher-order decisions. For many WaSH projects in PICs, the local community is engaged very late in the WaSH project development, and the scope of project decisions that the community can influence at that stage are very small – such as involvement in construction and subsequent use.

### Recommendation 4: Establish robust indicators to monitor community participation in WaSH, and document participation from a community perspective to improve future efforts

Establishing common and robust qualitative and quantitative indicators to monitor the design and implementation of participatory approaches in WaSH projects is crucial to assess and compare the commitment to community participation by the implementing organisations. These can be also used to monitor compliance with the policies and procedures established for participation. Such indicators need to be appropriate for each project while also being reflective of meaningful and impactful community participation to avoid being applied tokenistically. In addition, it is important that WaSH projects document their 'lessons learnt' in relation to community participation to inform the practice of future initiatives, to better facilitate participation as well as identify strategies to overcome participation barriers.

In summary, the extent to which the full potential of community participation is applied to support meaningful progress towards SDG6 will depend largely on when and how participation occurs in the planning and delivery timeline. The community participation target of SDG6b presents an opportunity to design policies and procedures that serve as a mechanism to engage communities at earlier points in the WaSH project delivery timeline – where the scope of decisions is greater.

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