Community Representation

Rural Community Network
SUPPORTING RURAL COMMUNITIES

Group Composition

The membership of the community group/committee should be balanced and representative of the area, ie it should be a small sample of the whole community. So the community group/committee should have a membership that reflects the make-up of the overall community, for example, male/female; young people/older people; single parents; farm families etc. Once such representation has been achieved, the community group /committee will have to work hard to maintain it.

Always ensure that the community group/committee has an effective mechanism to redress any imbalance and ensure that all interests are represented effectively, eg quotas, co-options.

If the membership of a community group/committee is not representative, then action will need to be taken to address this. This can be done in a number of ways.

1. Individuals can be targeted to become members of the community group/committee to address the imbalance. This process is often known as co-option. The number of co-options allowed may be limited by the constitution of the community group/committee and this should be checked before any action is taken.

2. The structure of the community group/committee can be established to ensure that appropriate representation is gained from all sections of the community by laying down certain rules in the constitution which establish quotas, for example, 50% men and 50% women. In addition places on the community group/committee can be reserved for certain interest groups, for example, farm organisations, disability forums, etc. Remember that the group will have to actively pursue these targets to remain constitutional.

3. Advertise for new members. The community group/committee can be very proactive in encouraging people to become involved in its work, particularly prior to the Annual General Meeting (AGM).

4. Target those groups that are usually under-represented in the community group/committee. Hold discussion groups/workshops with those interest groups that you particularly wish to encourage to become members of the community group/committee, for example, young people, senior citizens, etc. Ask why certain people/groups haven't been involved previously.

Community Involvement

It is essential that the community supports the development of a community group/committee in their area. The community group/committee must have a structure that will facilitate two-way communication with the community. Again the community group/committee needs to decide on the most appropriate ways to facilitate the exchange of information or communication. The community group/committee needs to be effective in its actions but also accountable to the community.

There are a number of ways in which this can be effectively achieved and these will develop over the lifetime of the community group/committee. For example:

⇨ Public/events meetings

⇨ Annual General Meetings

⇨ Information events/meetings, for example, hosting a 'road show'

⇨ Publicity materials/newspaper articles

⇨ Needs Analysis/Community Auditing

⇨ Community noticeboard or other focal point

⇨ Community news sheet or magazine

Checklist

Below are some questions a community group/committee can consider to determine if the membership is as representative as it could be.

1. Is the membership of your group balanced and representative of the area or target community? For example, male/female; young people/older people; religion; ethnic groups; geographical spread; able bodied /people with disabilities; single parents; unemployed; farm families, etc.

2. Does your group have an effective mechanism to redress any imbalance and ensure that all interests are represented effectively, eg quotas, co-options?

3. Are all members of your group encouraged to participate and have their say equally?

4. Are all group members' contributions listened to and valued equally?

5. Are knowledge and skills shared throughout the group or guarded by a limited number of members?

6. Does your group have a structure, which facilitates two-way communication with the community as part of normal practice?

7. How is information communicated outside the group – in an exclusive manner or as widely as possible?

8. What mechanisms are in place for the group to receive and act on feedback from the community?

9. How are members of the wider community enabled to participate in the life of the group and the decisions it makes on their behalf?

10. Does the group have a high profile in the local community?

11. How does the group know the needs of the local community?

Representing your Community Organisation or Community

If you hold a place representing your community organisation or community on any body, it is important to keep in mind the following issues:

• You must act in the interests of the common good as opposed to narrow self interest

• You must be accountable to those you are representing

• You must have appropriate structures by which you can be accountable to those you are representing

• Ensure effective two-way communication channels are in place with those you are representing so you can ensure you are representing community views effectively as well as feeding back information to groups on the ground

If your community organisation or community is responsible for nominating representatives to other bodies, for example, the Local Strategic Partnership or the Rural Support Network, then it is important to ensure:

⇨ Opportunities are created for all individuals to be nominated (if they wish to be)

⇨ Training and support (including physical resources) are provided on a regular basis

⇨ Effective two-way communication channels are in place between the community organisation or community and the representative

⇨ Research and information on the latest issues and community needs is available to the representative

Note: Individuals should be expected to represent the community organisation or community on no more than two other bodies. This aims to ensure that more people participate as community representatives and less pressure is placed on the individual so ensuring better quality representation.

All bodies requiring representatives from the community organisation or community should advertise their requirements widely to ensure that as many people as possible are able to apply.

All bodies requiring representatives from the community organisation or community should have a nomination form requesting basic information on the individual as well as their interests and experience. The matching of the requirements of the body to the interest and experience of the individual will be used to select the successful nominee.