

COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT TOOLS

How to do a Community Portrait



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Community Portraits

What is a community portrait?

There are many different kinds of community “profiles” or “portraits” and many different ways to do them. Several different organizations or institutions (for instance, health centres, public health boards, municipalities, economic development organizations, etc.) do their own community profiles, and they tend to be statistical. Some also include a qualitative component involving focus group discussions, interviews or public consultations.

The purpose of a community portrait is community development. In Quebec, the public health sector defines community development as:

“...a voluntary cooperative process of mutual assistance and building social ties between local residents and institutions, with the goal being to improve physical, social, and economic living conditions”
(INSPQ and MSSS, 2002)

This means that community members are integrated in all phases of the portrait process. Local stakeholders such as health and social services establishments, educational institutions, community organizations, and more are called upon to join forces with the community. In this way they can identify and develop local solutions that they can be a part of and care about. The final result is empowerment of individuals and communities.

Why do a community portrait?

Here are some objectives that a community might want to achieve:

To identify the key issues for the community

To determine the interests of the various stakeholders

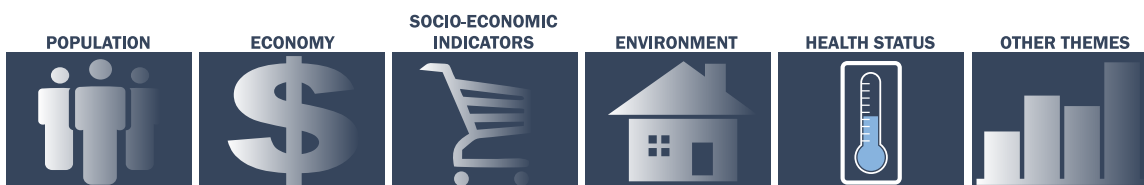
To find an idea that will bring people together (engagement)

To form a working group

To develop relevant local projects

How do you do a community portrait?

Step 1 : Gather background information on the community (statistics)



Step 2 : Gather the perspectives of community members

Organize a community consultation, kitchen-table meeting, forum or town hall style meeting. At this gathering, a broad range of community members discuss their topics such as the environment, social and community life, the economy, local policies, personal health and well-being, and their vision for the future.



Community consultation in St. Leonard, May 2012

This can not only help people become better acquainted with their community; it can be a way to mobilize community members in itself.

Step 3 : Gather other information, according to interest and resources

There are many other ways to gather information on your community. Here are some ideas, but there are many more!

- Community history, stories, photographs...
- Mapping of assets or other relevant local information
- Individual or group interviews on specific themes
- Photo essay
- School survey and kids' perspectives
- Storytelling



Drawing made a Sept-Îles youth for consultation- 2011

This can help gather information from people who did not participate in the community gathering, such as children, seniors, local officials, and more. The information can enrich the portrait and also help mobilize people.



Step 4 : Produce a summary of the community portrait

- Include key statistics
- Summarize the information for each theme from the forum
- Add any additional information you gathered
- Present it attractively in a document
- Include photos, maps or other visuals

This can be used to present to potential partners, to stimulate discussion, to apply for funding, and much more. It can be a sort of calling card!

Step 5 : Get feedback on the portrait

- Present the portrait at a second community gathering to get feedback on the results of the process.
- Do people recognize themselves in it?
- What else do you want or need to know about the community?
- How do you want to use this information?

Now you can identify priorities or an issue to address and make a plan.

Follow-up : Where does this portrait lead?

Don't forget to keep the ball rolling and follow up with concrete actions, otherwise community members can become demobilized and feel that the exercise was not worth it. How that is done may vary, and there may be many many ways to follow up, with different actors involved in different actions.

- Do you want to develop a local project?
- Do you want to do some research to better understand a specific issue?
- Do you want to make an action plan?
- Do you want to continue the conversation with members of the community?
- And more...

Starting the process

In order to make sure that you have buy-in from as many stakeholders as possible, take the time to meet with many of them before beginning the actual process.

Here are examples of who you might want to meet with:

- Municipality: mayor and council, recreation coordinator...
- Centre local de développement (CLD)
- Community Economic Development and Employability Corporation (CEDEC)
- Community Development Table
- CSSS : director, agent de liaison, community organizer...
- Direction de santé publique (community development representative)
- Agence de Santé
- Community organization-s (literacy, elder care, big brothers, food bank, thrift shop, homework help, youth club...)
- Schools: principal, teachers, school board trustee, governing board
- Religious institutions: priest, rabbi, imam, minister or person involved...
- Seniors' home/groups/clubs
- Social clubs (women's institute, Lion's club, Knights of Columbus, etc.)
- CPE/daycare centre



Sept-Îles, 50+ Club, 2011

Some people will simply want to be informed of what you're doing (often higher level officials), some people will be interested in being actively involved in the process, and some people will want to participate in the community consultation to share their perspectives with others.

One important factor in these meetings is to gather together existing information, such as past studies or reports, and to see how people view the community. You don't want to duplicate information that already exists, because that is not only a waste of precious time and resources, but can be demobilizing! Most organizations and groups already have a wealth of knowledge they are willing to share. And your job is to use what exists, summarize it, and go one step further with the consultation. Often the range of information has never been gathered together in one place.



Seizing opportunities

It is very important to know what else is going on in the community and to seize opportunities for collaboration. Is the municipality developing a family or a seniors' policy? Could they use the information generated by this project to feed into their process? Is this an opportunity to create a new partnership with an organization? Does your health centre want to gather information on the English-speaking population in the region? Could you use the consultation to ask the questions the CSSS needs answered?

In order to make it a win-win situation, you have to find those areas of collaboration and cross-over and try to kill two (or more!) birds with one stone. In doing so, all the different actors will get something out of their involvement and the end portrait will be useful to all.



New Carlisle Town Hall

The consultation

What is a community consultation?

A community consultation consists of bringing together a broad range of local actors to have them discuss their vision and perception of their community. It aims to provide an overview of the community's strengths, achievements and successes that foster sustainable community development.

Why organize a consultation?

- Sense of community building
- Information sharing
- Community positioning over certain issues
- Networks and partnerships building
- Cohesive action planning

In this process, it is really important to include ordinary citizens. Their perspective on their community is vital and may be different from those in official positions! In addition, citizen participation gives legitimacy to projects and ensures that actions taken are in keeping with people's aspirations for their community. People will be more likely to get involved if they feel a part of the process.

The more people you have from a broad cross-section of the community, the more different perspectives you will get, and the richer the conversation will be! You do not necessarily want consensus; you want people to engage in a stimulating dialogue that will contribute to a better understanding of all of issues and viewpoints.



'Youth' focus group at the Laval forum, November 2011

How do you organize a consultation?

1. Form an organizing committee

A good way to make the gathering as successful as possible is to form a core group composed of a variety of allies with whom you'll plan and hold the event. Each partner has access to some resources they might share and to people who trust them in the community. By joining the committee, partners can establish your event's credibility and increase public awareness over it in their own personal and professional networks.

2. Extend the invitation

- By word-of-mouth: call people, talk to friends and neighbours, send an email.
- This is often the best way!
- Through the school governing board or school bulletins
- Make an announcement on bulletin boards (in stores, at post boxes, at community centres, etc.), in local newsletters or newspapers, on local radio, through local community groups...
- Use your executive committee to spread the word
- Think of who might be have leadership potential, although they might not be identified as such



You should invite :

- Citizens from different social groups (age, ethnic, social class, etc.), and different sectors (education, food, security, etc.). You might want to look for those who seem to know everybody in the community, social groups, associations or events.
- Local associations from different activity sectors (health, education, social, etc.), including not for profit organizations, clubs, coalitions and cooperatives.
- Local private and public institutions: school, health, churches, seniors' homes, police, youth services, financial institutions, city, library, local markets and stores, local bars and restaurants, local employers, local unions, etc.

3. Plan the gathering

You will need:

- A date: avoid times where there are other important events, even popular TV shows or hockey games. Think of when you can have access to the people you want. If you're not sure, ask people from different backgrounds.
- A leader
- One or more designated note-takers. If a large group is coming, you may need facilitators as well.
- A chair/coordinator/timekeeper
- Chart paper and felt markers, note pads, pens, a projector, pictures of the community, etc
- A neutral location to hold the consultation such as a school or church basement

The day of:

- Set up the room, ideally in a circle, with room for small group conversations (no more than 14 people per group)
- Provide food and drinks to ensure your participants are comfortable and to promote a moment of networking between participants
- You may need volunteers to help with the planning



Preparation for the community consultation in the Lower North Shore, 2011.



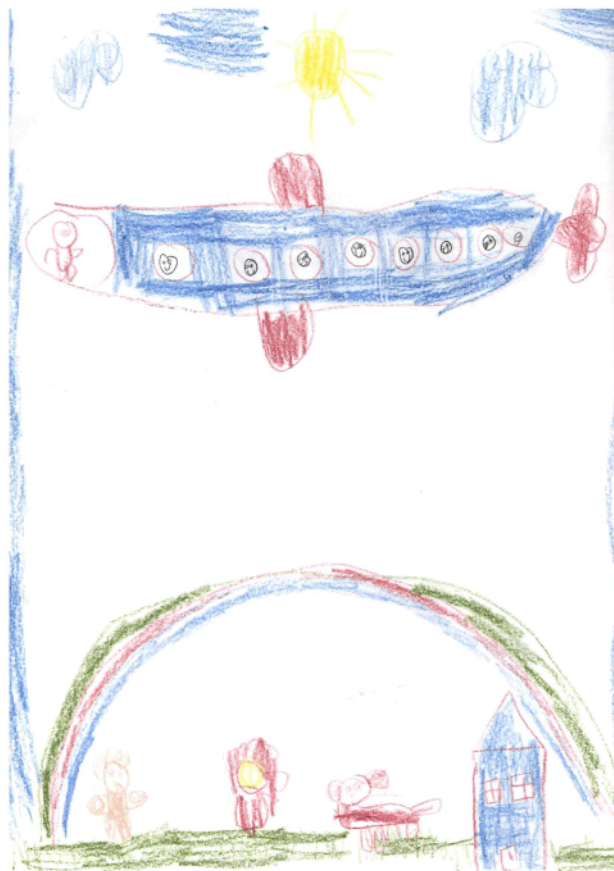
Consultation location in Sutton - United Church



Photo taken at Laval forum- November 2012- youth volunteers

4. Plan the discussion

- Base the consultation around a unique, big and overarching question: For example: How can we improve the quality of life in our community?
- Choose everyday life themes to address the main question; To cover every aspect of such a broad question you can usually talk about environments (natural, built, social, economic, services);
- Find a way to explain each theme: a picture of local settings related to each theme usually works best; short simple worded definitions can also work;
- While planning the session, consider that the best known angle to address subjects in community consultation is through assets (or strengths), aspirations and solutions. Assets give hope and make people proud, aspirations foster the will to act, and solutions realistically link community assets to community aspirations. Looking at community in terms of plain facts, needs or problems can either be boring, frustrating or discouraging;
- Gather facts to present for each subject. You need those to spur discussion and to give a “reality” basis to discussions. It can be statistics, photos, quotes from reports, or other information. Keep it short and sweet.



A sample agenda for the consultation

- Opening greeting
- Welcome people and greet them personally
- Start on time
- Restate the invitation (why we are here, in simple language, from the heart)
- Whole group discussion (if numbers permit)
- “What do you like and what do you value in your community?” (Prompt: What is a source of pride for you, what sets the community apart, what are its achievements, strengths, etc.?)
- Briefly present some information about the community such as a map, pictures, statistics and highlights (just a few, with comparisons to other places).

Small group discussions

Break into small groups with each group responsible for a theme. Try to make sure the number of people in each theme is equal. Ask what resources and activities contribute to sustainable community development? And what are the issues (strengths and challenges) related to this theme? Here are some examples of themes you could discuss:

1. The environment
2. Social and community life
3. The economy and employment
4. Education
5. Health and well-being
6. Other more specific themes that are of interest (youth, transportation, policies, special needs, mental health...)

Return to whole-group discussion

Ask a representative of each group to take turns sharing their conclusions (if you have a large number of participants, keep it brief, that is, one of two points per theme).

If your group is small, you may ask:

- “If you were asked to imagine a positive future for your community, what possibilities do you envision?”
- “What do we want to create together that would make a difference?”

Closing

- Are there issues that we feel we need to know more about, to understand better before taking action?
- Is there a small, do-able project that we feel could be set up?
- Do we want to form a core group to work on a specific project?
- How engaged are we willing to be, or plan to be?
- How has this conversation shifted our thinking?
- How could this conversation be continued?

Variations

Each community is different, so each consultation (town hall meeting, forum) will be slightly different.

For example, in St. Paul's River (a community of just a few hundred people) the whole meeting was conducted as a group, with no smaller focus group discussions. This means that everyone was involved in discussing every theme.



St. Paul's River Church where the gathering was held

In New Carlisle, a town of a little under 1500 people, we started as a large group, discussing what people value in their community. Then, we broke into 4 smaller groups with each group discussing a different theme. Then, everyone rotated to a new theme so that by the end everyone had a chance to express their perspectives on each theme. We finished off with another full-group discussion on people's vision for the future of their community.

In Laval, a very large city, a large number of participants were present and spread out on two different forum days. Participants were able to select a theme (out of 8) of their choice. In this context people spent most of their time in their smaller groups of 8-14 people. There was very little time given to the larger group as that task would have been overwhelming. Before the break-up of the groups however, everyone met first in the auditorium and the project was explained.



Laval Forum November 2011

So as you can see, each context requires a slightly different approach. Flexibility and creativity are the order of the day! There is no one "right" way to do it; just talk with the other stakeholders involved and remain open to adapting the plan.



Writing the portrait document

The portraits may look very different depending on the objective and the amount of information one has. Ideally, a community portrait should include:

- a description of the project and its objectives (partners, process, approach being used, etc)
- a description of the community (demographics)
- specific themes that were discussed (one issue or more)
- summaries of the perspectives of citizens who participated in the community consultation regarding these themes
- some statistics specific to that community, region, and province that are relevant to the themes or topics being discussed.

Other optional sections include:

- photos
- some history of the community, region, province, etc.
- data collected from a survey conducted at the forum or focus group that helps to understand the participants present and the community (age, ethnic origin, levels of educational attainment, and questions pertaining to their sense of community belonging).
- any appendices with pertinent information (survey questions, etc).



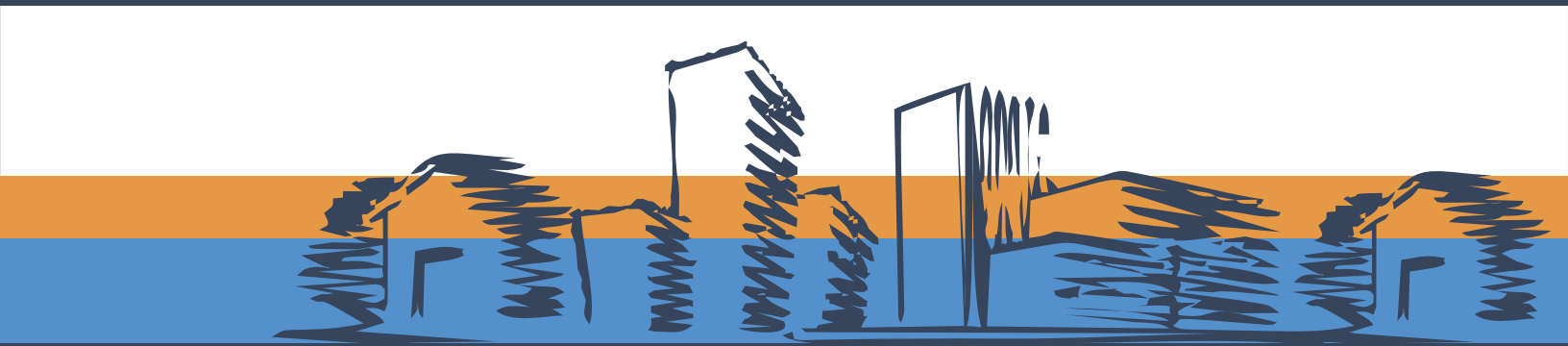
In conclusion

Hopefully this process will have helped you engage your community in issues that are important to them. You will have a more in-depth knowledge of your community and your network, particularly, its capacities and potential as well as the challenges it faces. This process may lead to new partnerships for your network such as sharing space in a community center, joining a networking table, or simply discussing plans for the future. The possibilities are endless...



Board walk in New Carlisle





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