What is community engagement?

3.1 Defining Community Engagement

Whenever a group of practitioners gather to discuss 'what is engagement,' a discussion about diversity of terminology usually emerges. Depending on the situation in which you are working, 'engagement' can cover consultation, extension, communication, education, public participation, participative democracy or working in partnership.

For our purposes, 'engagement' is used as a generic, inclusive term to describe the broad range of interactions between people. It can include a variety of approaches, such as one-way communication or information delivery, consultation, involvement and collaboration in decision-making, and empowered action in informal groups or formal partnerships.

The word 'community' is also a very broad term used to define groups of people; whether they are stakeholders, interest groups, citizen groups, etc. A community may be a geographic location (community of place), a community of similar interest (community of practice), or a community of affiliation or identity (such as industry or sporting club).

'Community engagement' is therefore a planned process with the specific purpose of working with identified groups of people, whether they are connected by geographic location, special interest or affiliation, to address issues affecting their well-being .[4] Linking the term 'community' to 'engagement' serves to broaden the scope, shifting the focus from the individual to the collective, with associated implications for inclusiveness, to ensure consideration is given to the diversity that exists within any community.

Cavaye extends this definition as it specifically relates to the role of government, noting community engagement "... is the mutual communication and deliberation that occurs between government and citizens."[5]

Community engagement can take many forms and covers a broad range of activities. Some examples of community engagement undertaken by government practitioners include:

- **Informing** the community of policy directions of the government.
- **Consulting** the community as part of a process to develop government policy, or build community awareness and understanding.
- **Involving** the community through a range of mechanisms to ensure that issues and concerns are understood and considered as part of the decision-making process.
- **Collaborating** with the community by developing partnerships to formulate options and provide recommendations.
- **Empowering** the community to make decisions and to implement and manage change.

[4] Queensland Department of Emergency Services (2001) *Charter for community engagement*, Community Engagement Unit, Strategic and Executive Services, Queensland Department of Emergency Services

[5] Cavaye, Dr. J (2001) 'Community engagement framework project: scoping and review paper', Cavaye Community Development/ CEO Committee on Land Resources, Queensland, citing OECD (2001) 'Engaging Citizens in policy-making: information, consultation and public participation', *PUMA Policy brief No 10*, July 2001, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development