

Literature Review: Assessing the Impact of Community Engagement

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1. Introduction

Community engagement is a multifaceted and dynamic concept that lies at the center of contemporary discussions surrounding social development, public policy, and the well-being of societies (Ahmed et al 2016; Starke et al. 2017; Janssen-Jansen & van der Veen 2017; Kernaghan 2009). It represents the process through which individuals, interest groups, and public institutions come together to actively participate in, contribute to, and shape the various aspects of their communities. Over the years, community engagement has emerged as a critical focal point for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners, as it holds the promise of fostering social cohesion (National Research Council 2014; Andrew & Turner 2006), enhancing civic participation (Beierle & Cayford 2002), and driving positive social change (O'Neill 2020).

This literature review seeks to provide an exploration of the diverse and evolving landscape of community engagement, drawing upon a wide array of scholarly works – which include public health, higher education, environmental sciences, urban planning, and government. Delving into this multifaceted subject involves examining conceptualizations of community engagement and identifying the key dimensions that define success in community engagement. Furthermore, exploring the benefits, challenges, and best practices of implementing community engagement is crucial. Finally, this review concludes by providing recommendations for the GSA to use as they conduct evaluations of community engagement at projects that seek to improve our nation's land ports of entry along America's northern and southern borders. Through this review, I hope to contribute to the ongoing dialogue on how community engagement can be

harnessed as a powerful tool for our nation to promote positive social transformation in our increasingly interconnected and complex world.

2. Conceptualizing Community Engagement

Exploring the landscape of terminology across various fields reveals that the concept of "community engagement" is widely recognized, albeit with variations in terminology and nuances depending on the specific context and discipline. While "community engagement" is a commonly used term, it may go by different names or have variations in meaning in different fields and regions.

In the realm of urban planning and development, you might encounter terms like "community participation" or "public participation" (Sanoff 2000). In healthcare and public health, similar concepts may be referred to as "patient engagement" or "stakeholder involvement" (Marzban et al. 2022; Nielsen et al. 2020). In the academic sphere, researchers often discuss "public involvement in research" or "citizen science" (Silvertown 2009), moreover, the humanities and social science might promote "participatory politics", or "deliberative democracy" (Jenkins et al. 2017; Willis et al. 2022). Environmental initiatives might employ "community involvement" or "public engagement in environmental decision-making" (Beierle & Cayford 2002; Wong et al. 2020).

Furthermore, the terminology may vary based on cultural and regional factors. What one community calls "community engagement," another might describe using a different phrase, or it may hold distinct cultural connotations. For instance, in Indigenous communities, the concept of community engagement is deeply intertwined with traditional practices such as "cultural sharing circles" or "elders' consultations," where wisdom and insights from the community's cultural

leaders play a central role in decision-making (Hunt & Young 2021; Lin et al. 2020). Similarly, some regions may use terms like "neighborhood forums" or "town hall meetings" to denote community engagement activities at the local level (Uline 2018).

Despite these variations, the underlying principle remains consistent: involving community members, stakeholders, or the public in decision-making processes to ensure their voices are heard, needs are addressed, and opinions are considered. Therefore, while the terminology may differ across fields and regions, the core concept of facilitating meaningful and inclusive participation remains a universal and essential aspect of many disciplines and sectors.

Community engagement has been characterized as a broad and inclusive term, and its definition varies depending on the context and the goals of engagement efforts (Ahmed et al. 2016). Nevertheless, at its core, community engagement involves the collaboration and active participation of community members in decision-making, problem-solving, and activities that affect their lives. To gain a deeper insight into the conceptualization of community engagement, the following will examine three distinct perspectives on community engagement. Subsequently, this section will end by synthesizing these perspectives and pinpoint the crucial themes and dimensions that will help define successful community engagement in GSA projects.

Some of the earliest definitions of community engagement characterized it as a means of empowering citizens (Freire 2018; Arnstein 1969; 1972; 1975). More specifically, [Sherry Arnstein](#), while serving as a special assistant to the assistant secretary at the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, conceptualized community engagement as "the redistribution of power that enables marginalized citizens to be intentionally included in shaping the future" (Arnstein, 1969, p. 216). Furthermore, Arnstein emphasized that community engagement within government settings should function as a strategy through which marginalized individuals

participate in decision-making processes related to information dissemination, goal and policy formulation, allocation of tax resources, program operation, and the distribution of benefits, such as contracts (p. 216). According to Arnstein's definition, community engagement should steer clear of initiatives aimed at merely allowing powerholders to "educate," "control," or "constrain" citizen participation. Instead, it should focus on enhancing the level of decision-making authority that citizens have over institutional activities.

Some scholars have conceptualized community engagement as the process of recognizing and mobilizing community assets and strengths (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Garcia, 2020). The [Asset-Based Community Development](#) (ABCD) model emerged as a response to traditional approaches to community engagement that primarily focused on identifying societal needs and deficiencies. Advocates of the ABCD model argue that institutions involved in community engagement should prioritize the development of policies and activities that harness the capacities and skills of community residents, rather than solely focusing on identifying community shortcomings, and problems. To achieve this, practitioners of the ABCD model should employ community engagement to (1) identify the assets within the community, (2) determine what the community could achieve with external assistance, and (3) delineate the tasks that outsiders must contribute to the community. The desired outcome of the ABCD model is institutions that facilitate community-led projects, with funding primarily directed to community residents for their work and the realization of community-driven projects that residents envision. Furthermore, the ABCD model places a strong emphasis on top-down community engagement that aim to educate and inform the public about existing community assets and how to leverage them for the betterment of the community.

Lastly, some definitions have expanded upon participation frameworks, such as the [Spectrum of Public Participation](#) (IAP2, 2007) and the [Spectrum of Public Involvement](#) (EPA, 2023), to delineate meaningful community engagement as a proactive process that aims for comprehensive community representation, takes into account public comments and feedback, and integrates that feedback into a project, program, or plan ([USDOT, 2022](#)). Practitioners adhering to this conceptualization underscore the importance of early and ongoing public involvement that incorporates a wide range of perspectives into the decision-making process. Consequently, meaningful community involvement should encompass (1) understand community demographics, (2) build durable relationships, (3) understand community wants and needs, (4) involve broad representation in the community, (5) use community-preferred engagement techniques, and (5) document and share community's impact on decision-making. Within the IAP2 framework, community engagement can manifest in various forms, including informing the public, consulting with the public, involving the public, collaborating with the public, and empowering the public. While this framework encourages practitioners to adopt bottom-up approaches, it also acknowledges that in certain situations, some projects may be better served by top-down conceptions of public participation.

Conceptual criticisms of the aforementioned understandings of community engagement have highlighted the notion that there may not be a singular, unified "community voice" (Levine, 2021). In essence, there might not exist a homogenous, self-contained community that an organization or participatory process could authentically speak for. According to these critics, community engagement efforts could be fundamentally flawed, as they may inadvertently construct an idealized notion of a community rather than authentically representing its diverse voices.

Critics argue that endeavors to empower marginalized groups can unintentionally exacerbate inequality, as policy decisions and priority-setting can be shifted from elected representatives to unelected private non-profit organizations and, in some cases, to privileged individuals. For example, certain non-profit organizations have employed highly structured engagement processes to bolster their claims as community representatives, often restricting membership boundaries and undermining dissenting voices (Levine, 2021). In another example, privileged homeowners have leveraged local participatory land use mechanisms to magnify their influence, potentially impeding or preventing the construction of multifamily housing in specific neighborhoods (Einstein et al., 2019; 2018).

Collectively, these criticisms caution that community engagement processes might sometimes engage more with the abstract concept of "community" than with its genuine members. Consequently, practitioners should be cognizant that the democratization of governance through community engagement is not achieved solely by individuals claiming to represent the entire community but rather by involving a variety of organizations with diverse interests and by empowering all members of a community, particularly those who have historically been marginalized.

Across these conceptualizations and criticisms, key themes emerge that should inform how the GSA understands community engagement:

1. **Power and Empowerment:** Community engagement seeks to empower marginalized or disenfranchised groups, enabling them to have a meaningful voice in decisions that affect their lives. To achieve this, practitioners should actively involve the public in bottom-up

activities that allocate a degree of decision-making authority to them. For instance, practitioners could (1) incorporate the public's concerns and aspirations into the development of project alternatives, (2) work collaboratively with the public to devise solutions and integrate their input and recommendations into decisions to the fullest extent feasible, or (3) implement decisions made by the public themselves. For instance, in a border region infrastructure project, community engagement can empower local Hispanic communities by involving them in the planning and prioritization of infrastructure needs. This could include forming advisory committees comprising community leaders and residents who actively contribute to project decision-making, ensuring that the infrastructure developments align with their specific needs and aspirations. By granting decision-making power to those directly affected, community engagement not only addresses marginalized groups' concerns but also fosters a sense of ownership and agency in shaping their community's future.

2. **Contextual Specificity:** Community engagement is by nature context-dependent, with the nature and objectives of engagement efforts varying based on factors such as cultural norms, socioeconomic conditions, and historical contexts. Hence community engagement seeks to understand the contextual specificity of each project. For example, in the context of infrastructure projects at the border, it's essential to recognize the unique characteristics of the Hispanic and Native communities living in border regions. Engagement strategies should consider factors like bilingual communication, the impact of border security measures, and the significance of cross-border trade and transportation. Understanding the historical context of border relations and the economic interdependence between border cities is crucial for tailoring infrastructure projects that

not only address the region's needs but also respect the cultural identity and specific challenges faced by these communities. This context-driven approach ensures that community engagement efforts are effective in fostering sustainable infrastructure development at the border while honoring the distinct attributes of the area.

3. **Relationship Building:** Building trust and fostering strong relationships among stakeholders, including community members, organizations, and government entities, is fundamental to engagement activities. For instance, in a long-term infrastructure project aimed at revitalizing an urban neighborhood, consistent and transparent communication with local residents, combined with collaborative decision-making processes involving community leaders and local businesses, can mitigate potential conflicts and ensure that the project aligns with community needs and aspirations. This collaborative approach not only builds trust but also empowers the community to actively shape the project's direction and outcomes.
4. **Participation Continuum:** Community engagement efforts aim to sustain citizen participation throughout all stages of a project, including decision-making and implementation. For example, in an environmentally sensitive development project, the participation continuum may begin with initial community consultations to gather input on project goals and environmental concerns. As the project progresses, ongoing engagement could involve collaborative workshops and regular updates, allowing community members to contribute ideas and monitor the project's adherence to environmental standards. In the implementation phase, the community may play an active role in initiatives such as tree planting or wildlife habitat restoration, ensuring that their involvement extends beyond consultation and empowers them to actively contribute to

the project's environmental goals. This continuum of participation ensures that community input remains influential and meaningful at every project stage.

5. **Asset-Based:** Community engagement seeks to identify and mobilize community assets, strengths, and resources to foster lasting, positive change. Consider a scenario where a municipality plans a new public park and seeks community input. Asset-based engagement would involve recognizing that local artists can contribute murals and sculptures to enhance the park's aesthetic appeal. Furthermore, it may involve tapping into the skills of nearby construction workers and volunteers to assist with park construction, reducing costs and fostering a sense of community pride. By emphasizing the talents and resources within the community, this approach transforms the park project into a collaborative effort that not only meets infrastructure needs but also strengthens community bonds and local capabilities.
6. **Collaborative Governance:** Community engagement underscores the need for collaborative decision-making processes that involve multiple stakeholders, including government agencies, nonprofit organizations, and community members. For instance, in a city's urban revitalization initiative, collaborative governance may entail forming a steering committee comprising city officials, local business leaders, neighborhood association representatives, and residents. This committee collaboratively designs and oversees the redevelopment plan, ensuring that it addresses both municipal objectives and the community's desires. Through ongoing dialogues and collective decision-making, this approach aligns public and private interests, resulting in a more inclusive and well-balanced urban renewal project that benefits all stakeholders and reflects the shared vision for the community's future.

GSA's endeavors to foster community engagement should be shaped and informed by the six previously mentioned themes of community engagement. Effective community engagement within the GSA will thoughtfully examine how to put each of these themes into practice in their initiatives.

3. The Impacts of Community Engagement

This section aims to offer a comprehensive overview of the effects of community engagement across a wide range of outcomes. Community engagement can significantly influence the social, economic, and environmental aspects of a community. Extant research has emphasized that community engagement leads to enhancements in social cohesion, public health, education, and sustainable development.

In the realm of social cohesion, community engagement has been shown to yield a wide array of benefits. Firstly, numerous studies have demonstrated that community engagement fosters social trust and cohesion (Burgess et al., 2021; Kumagai & Iorio, 2020; Brown et al. 2012; Andrews & Turner, 2006; Welch et al., 2005). Cross-sectional survey research has shown that when residents actively participate in community activities and decision-making, they are more likely to place trust in their neighbors (Ohmer, 2007; Ohmer and Beck, 2006) and local institutions (Huling, 2022; Goldfinch et al., 2023), resulting in stronger community bonds (Goldfinch et al., 2023; Loosemore & Higgon, 2016). Secondly, case studies have found that communities with high levels of engagement often experience lower crime rates (Nubani et al., 2023). Active community members are more inclined to collaborate in addressing crime-related issues, leading to safer neighborhoods (Nubani et al., 2023; Morrel-Samuels et al., 2016). Thirdly, observational studies have shown that community engagement can enhance residents' sense of belonging and attachment to their community, contributing to increased well-being and

better mental health (Haim-Litevsky et al., 2023). Lastly, community engagement and participation can empower marginalized groups in society to become more politically active (Blevins et al. 2020 (a); 2020 (b); LeCompte et al., 2019;), such as the elderly (Falanga et al., 2021), African Americans (Tiernan et al., 2013), and Hispanic immigrants (Djupe & Neiheisel, 2012; Zabin & Escala, 2001).

In the realm of public health, community engagement helps deliver positive outcomes that extend beyond medical settings. For instance, research has shown that community engagement, particularly when reaching out to marginalized and underserved populations, can contribute to the reduction of health disparities (Juarez et al., 2022). This achievement is attributed to community-based initiatives, which bridge vulnerable populations with local resources, ensuring they receive adequate care and support (Juarez et al., 2022; Schlechter, 2021). Furthermore, community engagement plays a crucial role in helping communities prepare for disasters and emergencies (Ramsbottom et al., 2017; Kim & Zakour, 2017; Laine, 2016). Collaborative efforts in planning and response have the potential to save lives and minimize damage (Palen et al., 2010).

In the realm of education, community engagement has yielded positive impacts that extend beyond traditional academic outcomes. It has created enriching learning environments for community members outside of formal educational settings (Wong et al., 2020). Furthermore, community engagement has the potential to provide opportunities for experiential learning and mentorship, allowing community members to explore various career paths and prospects within government institutions, local organizations, and business partners involved in engagement activities ([USDOE 2022](#); Scull & Cuthill, 2010). Lastly, community engagement can serve as a mechanism for holding institutions accountable for their performance. When community

members actively participate in decision-making and information dissemination, it often results in more effective governance (Pinto et al., 2021; Kardos, 2012; Neshkova & Guo 2011).

In the context of sustainability, community engagement assumes a critical role in both informing and providing resources to institutions throughout multiple stages of development and implementation. Research has consistently shown that local participation in initiatives leads to more responsible resource management (Kurniawan et al., 2022). Moreover, studies have demonstrated that engaged communities often reap economic benefits (Lund et al., 2021; Devine-Wright, 2010; Yigitcanlar & Velibeyoglu, 2008). Collaborative efforts tend to attract businesses, tourism, and investments that stimulate local economies and job creation (Lund et al., 2021; Joyner et al., 2019; Yigitcanlar & Velibeyoglu, 2008). Additionally, research underscores that communities engaged in climate adaptation and mitigation efforts are better equipped to confront the challenges posed by climate change ([USDOJ](#), 2021; Hügel & Davies, 2020; Wong et al., 2020). This body of research highlights how community engagement projects enhance the capacity, infrastructure, and influence of institutions and their partner organizations (Hügel & Davies, 2020; Wong et al., 2020).

Community engagement is increasingly recognized as a vital component of successful building and development projects. The literature underscores a range of benefits associated with involving community members in the planning and decision-making processes. Firstly, community engagement fosters a sense of ownership and pride among residents, leading to a stronger commitment to their community's long-term well-being (Hickey & Mohan, 2005). Secondly, it enhances project quality by incorporating local knowledge and preferences, resulting in built environments better aligned with community needs (Fainstein, 2014). Thirdly, community involvement contributes to more effective resource allocation and utilization,

improving project cost-effectiveness and resource efficiency (Bovaird, 2007). Moreover, community engagement helps mitigate potential conflicts during construction, promoting smoother implementation and project success (Innes & Booher, 2018). Lastly, engaging with local communities builds social capital, strengthening relationships among stakeholders and fostering a collaborative atmosphere (Pretty & Ward, 2001).

4. Challenges to Effective Community Engagement

The process of community engagement is not without its challenges, which can hinder its effectiveness. This section aims to examine and synthesize the key challenges faced in achieving effective community engagement across various domains.

First, one of the most prominent challenges in community engagement is the failure to ensure inclusivity. This challenge arises when certain groups within a community are marginalized or excluded from the decision-making process (Geekiyanage; et al. 2020; Cornwall & Brock 2005; Arnstein 1969). Factors such as language barriers, cultural differences, socioeconomic disparities, and limited accessibility can lead to the underrepresentation of key community voices (Geekiyanage; et al. 2020). Without meaningful participation from all segments of the community, decisions may not align with the diverse needs and preferences of the population (Arnstein 1969).

Key solutions to this challenge emphasize the need to establish community liaison officers or cultural brokers who can bridge language and cultural gaps, facilitating effective communication and engagement with diverse community groups (Coombes & Ponta 2022). Moreover, research on engaging hard-to-reach populations at the border has demonstrated that house-to-house recruitment, as well as developing culturally sensitive materials with input and

suggestions from community members, allows practitioners to reach larger portions of the population and decrease participant dropout rates (Juarez et al., 2022).

Second, lack of effective communication is often a core challenge to community engagement. Challenges arise when communication is not tailored to the community's preferences and literacy levels, making it difficult for individuals to understand and participate (Juarez et al. 2022; Geekiyana; et al. 2020). For instance, in a healthcare context, disseminating medical information using complex terminology to a community with limited health literacy may lead to confusion and disengagement. To address this, practitioners should adopt a plain language approach, providing clear and easily understandable information, as exemplified by health departments that create pamphlets and educational materials in plain language, ensuring accessibility for diverse audiences.

Furthermore, miscommunication or a lack of transparency can severely erode trust between community members and institutions, hindering the engagement process (Petty & Ward, 2001). For example, in urban development projects, a lack of transparent communication about project goals, timelines, and potential disruptions can lead to community resistance and opposition. To mitigate this challenge, institutions should prioritize transparent communication channels, regularly update the community on project progress, and actively seek feedback to demonstrate a commitment to openness and responsiveness.

Third, resource constraints often pose significant challenges to the successful execution of community engagement initiatives. Communities facing limited access to funding, technology, and skilled facilitators may encounter difficulties in organizing and sustaining engagement efforts (Agrawal et al., 2023; Juarez et al., 2022; Head, 2007). For instance, in rural communities with limited access to technology and transportation, conducting online public meetings or

workshops may exclude a significant portion of the population, hindering their participation in decision-making processes.

Unintended consequences of community participation, such as exhaustion and stress, have been well-documented, especially among marginalized groups, including immigrants and people with disabilities when engagement efforts lack the necessary resources to cater to their needs (Attree et al., 2010). For example, in a community-driven healthcare initiative, insufficient funding for interpreter services can lead to miscommunication and added stress for non-English-speaking residents. To address this, organizations can allocate resources to provide translation services and accommodate diverse linguistic needs, ensuring meaningful participation.

As a result, limited resources can unfairly burden specific individuals or organizations, possibly leading to burnout and disengagement (Gorski & Chen, 2015; Chen & Gorski 2015). For instance, community organizers who take on multiple roles due to a lack of skilled facilitators may experience burnout, resulting in reduced engagement capacity. To prevent this, organizations can invest in capacity-building efforts and training for community leaders to share the workload and sustain engagement efforts effectively.

Fourth, power imbalances between institutions, stakeholders, and community members can disrupt the democratic principles of community engagement. When certain groups or entities hold more influence, it can stifle the voices of marginalized communities, resulting in decisions that do not prioritize their interests (Griffin et al., 2014; Gaventa & Cornwall, 2009). Furthermore, entrenched interests and privileged homeowners have used local participatory land use to amplify their powers at the expense of marginalized groups (Einstein et al., 2019). For example, in urban development projects, powerful real estate developers may exert undue

influence over planning decisions, leading to the displacement of vulnerable communities and gentrification. Similarly, privileged homeowners, whose voices are more easily amplified during engagement efforts, might oppose or restrict the construction of multifamily housing in their neighborhoods. These unequal power dynamics can marginalize residents who have historically lived in the area, especially those from marginalized backgrounds.

Addressing these power dynamics and fostering equitable partnerships is essential for effective engagement (Arnstein, 1969). To promote fairness and inclusivity, community agreements and memoranda of understanding (MOUs) can be established between powerful entities, such as corporations or government agencies, and diverse community representatives. These agreements can outline the terms of engagement, including shared decision-making processes and a commitment to prioritize community interests beyond only the privileged few.

Additionally, capacity-building initiatives that empower marginalized communities with the knowledge and skills needed to participate effectively can help level the playing field. For instance, providing training in advocacy, negotiation, and leadership can enhance the ability of community members to advocate for their interests and challenge existing power imbalances. Moreover, decisions for the community should not be left in the hands of organizations representing the interests of a limited number of stakeholders or interests. Consequently, the utilization of targeted focus groups that prioritize the voices of marginalized individuals over those of the privileged can also assist practitioners in avoiding the perpetuation of existing social inequalities.

Fifth, communities may exhibit resistance to engagement initiatives due to skepticism, fear, or a history of unmet promises (O'Neil, 2021; Baum et al., 2006). For instance, in environmental conservation projects, communities located near protected areas may resist

engagement efforts if they have experienced negative impacts from previous conservation projects, such as loss of access to natural resources or restricted land use. Overcoming this challenge requires building trust over time through consistent and transparent actions (Juarez et al., 2022). In the context of development, trust can be established by consistently delivering on infrastructure projects and being transparent about the decisions and outcomes of the project, thereby demonstrating a commitment to community well-being.

Furthermore, resistance can emerge from entrenched interests within institutions that are resistant to change or fear losing control over decision-making processes (Levine, 2021; Arnstein, 1969). For instance, in educational reform initiatives, resistance may come from school administrators or policymakers who are reluctant to relinquish control over curriculum decisions. To address this, engagement efforts can involve capacity-building sessions and awareness programs aimed at institutional stakeholders to foster a culture of collaboration and shared decision-making. Moreover, government stakeholders should remain aware that the interest of a single non-profit organization does not necessarily represent the interest of all stakeholders or members of the community (Levine, 2021). Hence, government practitioners seeking to engage communities should not make decisions based on comments from a single voice in the community but should rather try to reach to organizations with a wide range of interests, as well as to diverse members of the community.

Sixth, many community engagement initiatives suffer from a short-term focus that prioritizes immediate outcomes over long-term sustainability (Lasker & Miller, 2001). For example, in disaster relief efforts, there may be a rush to provide immediate aid and assistance to affected communities, but long-term recovery and resilience-building efforts may receive less attention, leaving communities vulnerable to future disasters.

Communities often need ongoing support and commitment to address the complex issues raised through community engagement efforts (USDOT, 2022). However, funding and resources are often allocated to projects with quick results, leaving underlying problems unaddressed (Lasker & Miller, 2001). Take urban renewal projects, for instance; focusing solely on the immediate physical redevelopment of an area can overlook the long-term social and economic well-being of the community. Sustainable change requires ongoing investment in education, job opportunities, and social services to ensure that residents continue to benefit from the transformation. In other words, there is often an emphasis on short-term interventions to address immediate crises, but systemic issues contributing to social disparities may go unaddressed.

Seventh, the lack of evaluation and accountability represents a common threat to the effectiveness of community engagement. This issue is compounded by the fact that measuring the impact and outcomes of community engagement efforts can be challenging (Ahmed et al., 2016; Janssen-Janssen & van der Veen, 2017; Laurian & Shaw, 2008). A lack of clear metrics and accountability mechanisms makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of engagement strategies, hindering the ability to learn from past experiences and improve future initiatives (O'Mara-Eves et al., 2013). Without robust evaluation, it's challenging to identify which aspects of an engagement program were successful and which need improvement.

To address this challenge, organizations and institutions should prioritize the development of comprehensive evaluation frameworks that include both quantitative and qualitative measures. Additionally, creating feedback loops that involve community members in the evaluation process can help ensure that their perspectives are considered and incorporated into future engagement strategies. Finally, institutions should promote the use of meta-analysis in

order to improve the trustworthiness of the evidence from engagement efforts (O'Mara-Eves et al., 2013).

Ninth and finally, Community engagement in construction projects, while crucial for ensuring community buy-in and addressing local concerns, often introduces timing challenges. For example, in the construction of a new urban development project, engaging with the local community may lead to design modifications or additional environmental assessments, which can extend the project timeline. If timing becomes a challenge, it will not only slow the completion of the project, but also ensure that less is built, for a lot more money (Klein 2023).

One solution to mitigate delays is early and proactive engagement. By involving the community at the project's conceptual stage, developers and planners can identify potential issues and incorporate community feedback into initial plans. For instance, in the construction of new facilities, engaging with local residents early on can help address concerns about noise pollution or traffic congestion, allowing for timely solutions that do not disrupt the project's timeline.

Additionally, utilizing technology can streamline community engagement processes. Virtual town hall meetings, online surveys, and interactive project websites can facilitate efficient communication with the community, enabling project teams to gather input and make informed decisions while adhering to construction schedules. By balancing community engagement with efficient project management, the challenges related to project timing can be effectively addressed.

5. Best Practices to Measure the Impact of Community Engagement

Measuring the impact of community engagement is a multifaceted task that demands a combination of frameworks, methods, and ethical considerations. Adopting best practices can enhance the accuracy and relevance of impact assessments. However, each community engagement initiative is unique, requiring tailored approaches to measurement to account for diverse contexts and goals. This section will provide an overview of the best frameworks, methods, and considerations highlighted by the extant literature on community engagement.

To effectively measure the impact of community engagement, researchers and practitioners often rely on conceptual frameworks that guide their evaluation efforts. Several prominent frameworks have emerged:

1. **Logic Models:** [Logic models](#) are graphical representations that outline the inputs, activities, outputs, and outcomes of community engagement initiatives. They help in mapping the causal relationships between engagement activities and their impact (Kellogg Foundation, 2004).
2. **Social Return on Investment (SROI):** [SROI](#) is a comprehensive approach that quantifies the social, environmental, and economic value generated by community engagement projects. It assigns monetary values to outcomes, enabling a holistic assessment ([Corvo et al. 2022](#)).
3. **Theory of Change:** The [Theory of Change](#) framework outlines a series of connected events and outcomes, demonstrating the causal pathway from community engagement activities to long-term impact (Connell & Kubisch, 1998). It emphasizes the importance of clear, well-defined theories underlying initiatives.

Measuring the impact of community engagement requires a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods. Some best practices include:

1. **Surveys and Questionnaires:** Public health practitioners often use these tools gather quantitative data on changes in knowledge, attitudes, and behaviors among community members as a result of engagement activities (Bowling, 2023). In addition, surveys in combination with qualitative methods have been used in planning to evaluate how community engagement affects the process and outcomes of planners (Laurian & Shaw 2009).
2. **Key Informant Interviews:** Interviews with community leaders, stakeholders, and project staff provide valuable qualitative insights into the impact of engagement efforts (Patton, 2015). Moreover, key informant interviews can be essential to measure the social capacity and resources of engagement efforts (See Chazdon and Lott 2015; 3020 for an examples).
3. **Focus Groups:** Focus group discussions help capture diverse perspectives, identify emerging issues, and gauge community perceptions regarding engagement outcomes (Krueger & Casey, 2014). Moreover, targeted focus groups can help practitioners better understand the experiences of hard to reach and marginalized populations (See Tiittanen & Turjamaa 2022, Makosky Daley et al. 2010 and for examples).
4. **Case Studies:** In-depth case studies offer a comprehensive understanding of how community engagement initiatives operate and their impact within specific contexts (Yin, 2018; see Johnson et al. 2015 for an example).

Measuring the impact of community engagement might require additional considerations depending on the goals of the engagement efforts. Some best practices to keep in mind include:

1. **Stakeholder Involvement and Participation:** Best practices for measuring impact emphasize involving stakeholders throughout the engagement, and evaluation process.

Engaging community members, project beneficiaries, and local leaders in defining evaluation criteria and methodologies enhances the credibility and relevance of the assessment (Juarez 2022; Reed et al. 2017).

2. **Long-term Monitoring and Evaluation:** Community engagement often yields long-term, sustainable impacts that may not be immediately evident. Therefore, continuous monitoring and evaluation are essential to capture these effects over time. Regular feedback loops enable project adjustments and improvements (Patton, 2015).
3. **Contextual Sensitivity:** Effective impact measurement considers the unique cultural, social, and economic contexts of the community. Researchers and practitioners should adapt methods and metrics to suit the specific needs and preferences of the target population (Juarez 2022; Cronje et al 2011).
4. **Interdisciplinary Collaboration:** Measuring the impact of community engagement often requires expertise from multiple disciplines. Consequently, collaboration efforts between experts from multiple disciplines, including sociology, psychology, public health, and economics, ensure a more comprehensive assessment of outcomes (Bryson et al., 2015).
5. **Ethical Considerations:** Respect for ethical principles, such as informed consent, privacy, and cultural sensitivity, is paramount when measuring the impact of community engagement. Practitioners should prioritize ethical guidelines to ensure the well-being and dignity of participants (Adhikari et al. 2019).
6. **Conclusion and Recommendations for the GSA**

In conclusion, this final section offers recommendations to the GSA as they formulate their evaluation plan for community engagement initiatives aimed at enhancing our nation's land ports of entry along the northern and southern borders of the United States.

Firstly, the GSA should conduct both quantitative and qualitative assessments of the impact of their community engagement initiatives on community empowerment. Specifically, these evaluations should determine whether these efforts merely disseminated information to community members or genuinely provided a platform for meaningful involvement in decision-making and project implementation. Furthermore, the GSA should evaluate the extent to which their engagement strategies were inclusive and elevated the voices of marginalized and disenfranchised community members.

Secondly, the GSA should assess whether their initiatives took into consideration the cultural norms, socioeconomic conditions, and historical context of the communities they engaged with. Existing research along the U.S. southern border has shown that involving community members in the early development of communication material and following their suggestions for engagement leads to culturally sensitive recruitment materials and a deeper understanding of social dynamics and power structures within these communities (Juarez 2022). Additionally, past engagement efforts have demonstrated the benefits of involving voices from communities from both sides of the U.S. and Mexico (Wong et al. 2020). Consequently, the GSA should evaluate how each project comprehended the unique context of the U.S. border. This evaluation should encompass quantitative and qualitative analysis in three key areas: (1) understanding community demographics and economic conditions, (2) incorporating cultural norms, and (3) grasping the historical context of border communities.

Thirdly, the GSA should appraise the extent to which their community engagement initiatives built lasting relationships with the community. Specifically, quantitative, and qualitative metrics should be employed to assess how these efforts cultivated connections with

(1) community members, (2) local organizations, and (3) local and state government entities, as well as elected officials.

Fourthly, the GSA's evaluation should examine the timing of their engagement efforts along the participation continuum. This entails understanding how effective these efforts were at sustaining community participation at various stages of the projects. To achieve this, the GSA should employ both quantitative and qualitative methods to ascertain whether engagement occurred (1) solely before the decision-making process, (2) exclusively during decision-making, (3) only during project implementation, or (4) at different stages throughout the project's lifecycle.

Fifthly, the GSA should evaluate whether their engagement initiatives were asset-based. This entails assessing whether these efforts identified and harnessed community assets, strengths, and resources. In particular, the evaluation should delve into how engagement strategies aimed to identify and mobilize (1) community associations, (2) physical assets, (3) community institutions, (4) local economies, (5) local culture, and (6) individuals to enhance border projects.

Lastly, the GSA should assess how their engagement initiatives promoted collaborative governance within the projects. This evaluation should specifically address how these efforts (1) influenced the outcomes of the decision-making process and (2) whether these alterations included recommendations from local and state government agencies, local organizations, and/or community members.

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