

# Community participation in meetings & engaging with government

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USAID: RESILIENCE IN THE LIMPOPO BASIN PROGRAM (RESILIM) - OLIFANTS



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The purpose of this brochure is to

Provide awareness on the importance of community participation

The various forms of participation

How to increase community capacity to participate

Engage with government agencies

This communication or awareness pamphlet is for communities that have claimed land in protected areas within South Africa, and are in the process of or have already negotiated partnerships with the government management agencies for the protected areas. It is also useful for others involved in the process - the facilitating organisation and the government agencies and departments in their engagement with communities.

## Why is participation important in co-managing protected areas?

Co-management is a situation in which two or more social actors negotiate, define and agree amongst themselves a fair sharing of the management functions, benefits and responsibilities for a given territory, area or a set of natural resources.

Important components of co management include:

- Participation;
- Building empowerment;
- Equity, trust and learning among key actors; and
- Ultimately, the transfer of rights to the communities as owners of the land.

### The example of Legalameetse

In the case of co-management of Legalameetse Nature Reserve, the actors include the management authority - Limpopo Department of Economic Development Environment and Tourism (LEDET) and the new land owners - communal Property Associations (CPAs) and adjacent communities

## What is participation?

Participation can be defined as a process in which two or more parties influence each other in the making of decisions. In decision making each individual party has equal power to determine the outcome of the decisions. However, some parties may not be aware that they have power to influence the outcome of the decision making process and fail to utilise their power. This is usually due to lack of awareness.

Participation involves communication, which is the different ways in which information is shared and spread. There are different types of communication this including; verbal, non-verbal, formal and non-formal communication. It is important that communities know these and that how they are used can influence the impact of their participation in decision making processes.



## Why is participation important?

Participation is important in co-management as it allows all the concerned parties to take part in decision making related to the conservation area. This reduces conflict between the communities and the protected areas management agents. It is also an important principle for good governance



Co-management engagement with wider communities

## What are the types of participation?

There are three main types of participation. These are public participation, social participation and individual participation.

Each of these types of participation are relevant to co-management and are explained in the table that follows.

TABLE 1: TYPES OF PARTICIPATION

Participation	Public	Social	Individual
<b>Refers to....</b>	The engagement of individuals with the various structures and institutions of government. Key to public participation is the relationship between individuals and the government.	The collective activities that individuals may be involved in. These are the associations people form between and for themselves.	The individual choices and actions that people make as part of their everyday life that are statements of the kind of society they want to live in.
<b>Other names</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Political or civil participation</li><li>- Public engagement</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Collective action</li><li>- Civil or community participation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Everyday politics</li></ul>
<b>Examples</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Voting in local or national elections</li><li>- Being a councillor</li><li>- Taking part in government consultations</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Being a member of a community group, a tenants' association or a trade union</li><li>- Supporting local NGOs or CBOs by volunteering</li><li>- Running a study group for a faith organisation</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Signing petitions</li><li>- Buying fair-trade goods</li><li>- Boycotting specific products</li><li>- Donating money to charities</li></ul>



**Public participation:**  
*A process that directly engages the public in decision making and gives full consideration to public input in making that decision.*

**Important to note:**

This is a process and it gives stakeholders the opportunity to influence decisions. It is a process that is used by the state to engage the public and get their input in decision making processes such as a new Bill.

**Public participation may take various forms such as:**

- Providing information to help the community understand issues, options and solutions e.g. land restitution process.
- Consulting to get feedback on alternative decisions e.g. co-management options available.
- Involving the public to ensure their concerns are considered throughout the decision making process especially the development of criteria for the development of a co management agreement.
- Collaborating with the public to develop decision criteria and options and preferred solutions.
- Empowering the public by placing final decision making authority in their hands.

**Important note:**

The key aspect is stakeholder communication.

**Other aspects that shape/ influence participation**

There are other aspects that influence the level and type of participation that communities can engage in. These are based on who has initiated the process, how has it been initiated and the duration of the participation.

These include whether participation is:

- Formal or informal;
- Reactive or proactive;
- Passive or active;
- Individual or collective;
- Once off or ongoing;
- Paid or unpaid;
- Driving change or resisting social change;
- For self-interest or for the good of the general public/community.



*Community decides to include a portion of land within the LNR*



## What factors limit participation?

In the case of co-management, the key factors limiting participation are closely linked to communication between the state and communities.

- **Community capacity to participate** (participation skills) effectively in the public participation process is important and should be built.
- **Planning for the meetings:** When calling for meetings of community members, there should be sufficient notice and different ways of spreading the call. Where possible, background information (either reading materials or radio announcements, posters etc.) should be provided so that people come prepared for the meeting.
- **Venue of the meeting:** It is important to find a venue that is as central as possible in terms of distance and accessibility to ensure wider participation. The venue should also be in a neutral space where all members feel comfortable. This is especially important where there are conflicts between certain community groups.
- **Language barriers:** South Africans speak many different languages and have different words for ideas and issues that may need to be discussed. It is therefore important that simple and clear words are used at all times and (if necessary) use a translator to convey important information (verbal as well as written). This is especially important for government agencies when engaging with the CPAs who may not fully understand the language of the facilitator.

- **Cultural barriers:** Different South African ethnic groups have different cultural/traditional practices and these may affect the way that the conservation area leadership can communicate effectively with all members of sub-sectors of the community. The way ethnic groups relate to the different leadership structures within the conservation area can also limit participation of some groups.
- **Organisational barriers:** A simple conservation area organisational structure will make communication easier; an overly complex structure, on the other hand, could result in communication breakdown. The number of ranks or levels in the organisational structure (such as the management committee) should be as few as possible. The management structure should have clear communication lines e.g. management committee chairperson to CPA chairperson and CPA chairperson informs the CPA committee.



*Youth listening to one of the elders during the historicity and mapping session during the LNR Youth Engagement Workshop in September 2017*



*LNR communities sharing co-management experiences and lessons.*

dealt with in any detail due to time constraints. The committee or government agency should, in this instance, choose a few main and pressing issues that need to be discussed and/or shared with the CPA members, and leave other, less important, issues to another time.

- **Physical barriers:** Some community conservation areas cover large areas and members are located in different areas. This provides challenges in communicating with all members of the community as people live long distances from one another, and may not have access to telephones, radios etc.
- **Gender barriers:** There are many interconnecting historical, cultural, social and education-based reasons why women may be prevented from communicating freely, or accessing means of communication equitably. Therefore, a CPA should encourage equal participation and representation of both men and women in all conservation area activities. Facilitating agents should have training sessions for women in public participation and speaking, especially those in leadership positions.
- **Information overload:** The CPA committee and government personnel should know how to prioritise the information that needs to be communicated. It is critical not to overload audiences with unnecessary information. For example, having a meeting agenda that has too many points that need to be covered in a couple of hours will not contribute towards good communication as no single issue will be
- **Improper feedback:** Feedback delivered in a negative manner is neither helpful nor constructive. A good communicator can deliver negative feedback so that it is received constructively. Constructive feedback will lead to effective and productive communication between a facilitating agency and the community, or between the CPA committee and the CPA community. It is therefore important to convey bad news or details of a problem in a way that opens up a dialogue about resolving a situation and controlling its effects.
- **Inappropriate communication methods:** The CPA leadership should exercise care in choosing its medium of communication. Simple messages can be conveyed verbally (informally as a face-to-face interaction, or formally at meetings, for example). Use of written means of communication should be encouraged for delivering complex messages, or instructions that require someone to act upon them. For significant messages, reminders can be issued in writing.



- **Literacy levels:** Not every community member is able to read or write, or do so in the same language as other members. This will have an influence on the strategies used to communicate. For example, wherever possible, key documents should be summarised into a poster format, using icons/illustrations instead of names/words, for display in the CPA office or strategic locations within the community.
- **Disabilities:** In the conservation area there may be people who are disabled (e.g. hearing impaired, visually or verbally challenged, etc.). It is important that efforts are made to accommodate these individuals wherever practical (i.e., using sign-language interpreters, or making sure that lip readers are placed close to a speaker).

Most decisions by government departments in co- management (e.g. DRDLR and LEDET) are through public consultations with the communities. The decisions reached are based on the contributions of the vocal members of the community. In this regard it is important that members of the CPA develop their skills in participating in public meetings.



*Community radio focus group discussions on building co-management awareness*

## What are the participation skills?

The skills set required for participation depends on whether it is individual, public or social (group) participation that is taking place.

In the context of co- management the most common level of participation is through public meetings of the CPA, either with its members, with government departments or other external agencies.

The level of participation by the CPA members at public meetings is determined by the individual contributions to the discussions.

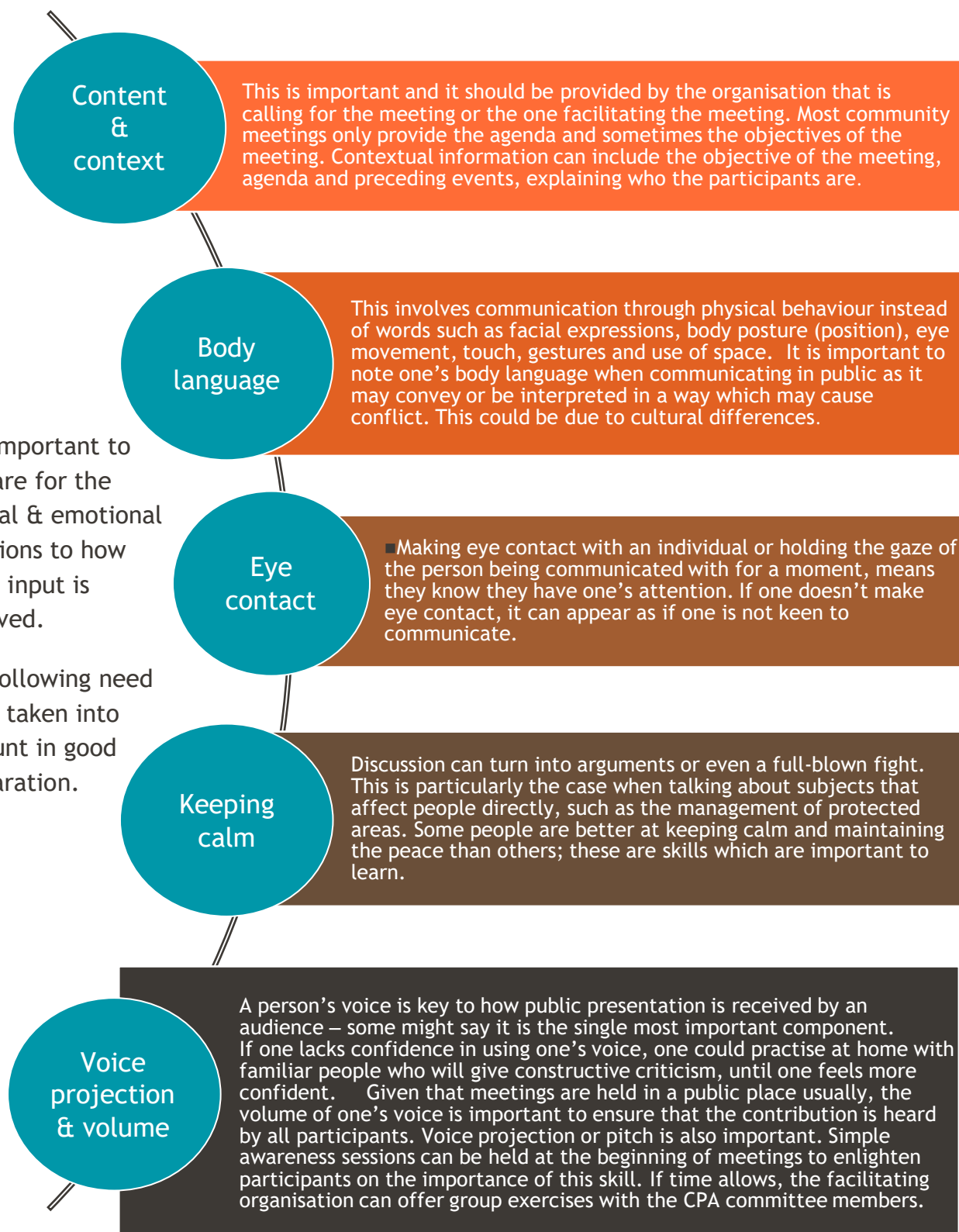
Participation can be through responding to a question, contributing through asking a question or seeking clarification, contributing to the group discussions, raising an objection, making a following up, providing a correction or making a presentation to the group.

For government officials and the staff of support organisations, it may seem to be a small matter to speak at a public gathering, but for those who are not used to this or those not trained for speaking in group sessions, it is a major challenge.

There are simple skills that CPA members can be supported to enhance for effective participation in meetings either at CPA level or with other external agencies. These are listed below.



## Preparation





## Strategies for engaging government

When communities are involved in processes that require them to engage or interact with government agencies, there are a number of challenges which may not be so obvious to the community concerned, the government agencies and facilitating agencies.



*Communities using strategies to engage with government agency*

These challenges are both internal and external and they require action from the communities, and support organisations involved. This is the case with co management processes in South Africa.

## Challenges faced by communities in engaging government

Challenges faced by communities in engaging with government agencies include: lack of prior knowledge of topics being discussed, communication on meetings not on time; language used in meetings (usually English) makes it difficult for community members to understand and follow discussions, lack of

skills on how to participate, negotiate and be heard.

Other challenges relate to how to convey community concerns to government agencies when a meeting has not been called; how to initiate discussions with government, which department to approach and

how, and general lack of awareness on government procedures for certain processes such as co management.



## Strategies to engage government

Communities can use several strategies to engage with government, either at individual or community level. These could be formal or informal; verbal or non-verbal and internal and external. In all strategies, preparation is important

### Common strategies include:

#### **Petitions:**

Written documents stating a request or demanding some form of action with respect to a particular issue from government or some authority which is signed by a large number of people.

#### **Protests:**

This includes demonstrations, marches, and public meetings, sit-ins, hunger strikes, vigils, boycotts, press conferences, and legal lawsuits as a way of expressing public opinion on a particular issue.

#### **Demonstrations:**

Action taken by a group or collection of group of people in support of a particular cause. This involves walking in a mass march from beginning to end with a meeting at a defined point. These may require legal permits from the authorities such as the police.

#### **Dialogue through representatives:**

Dialogue is taking part intentionally in a conversation with the aim to increase understanding, address problems as well as exchange ideas or opinions and reach an agreement or some settlement. For communities, dialogue with government agencies may be through their representatives (committee members or selected community representatives) as it may be difficult for the whole community to participate in focussed discussions. This can be at government offices or a neutral venue.



### **Use of a mediator or facilitator:**

In some instances, it may be difficult for the parties involved (communities and government or private sector) to engage effectively on their own especially where there is conflict. A mediator or facilitator may be required to move the process forward. This is important in co-management processes where both the government and communities have an interest in the protected area.

Facilitators and mediators may be non-governmental organisations (NGOs), research or academic institutions that have interest in an issue affecting the community and therefore take up the role of being an independent facilitator.

Communities or government agencies can also approach an organisation or person to take up the mediation or facilitation role for their engagement.

#### ***A mediator:***

*a person who attempts to help people involved in a conflict come to an agreement.*

#### ***A facilitator:***

*a person /organisation that makes an action or process easier.*

### **Open discussions in a public meeting:**

This is a commonly used method by communities in their own internal discussions and by government agencies in engaging the public. It involves people coming together to hear what the speakers have to say, express their views, or engage in shared learning. However, if not well facilitated, these usually end up being a one-person show for the speaker with little or no feedback, therefore no shared learning taking place. The assumption is that it is the communities or listeners who need to learn and not the speaker.

### **Physical visits for face to face meetings/discussions:**

In some instances communities may have to initiate and organise visits to government offices for face to face meetings or to follow up issues instead of waiting for return visits by government officials.



# award

The Association for Water and Rural Development

AWARD is a non-profit organisation specialising in participatory, research-based project implementation. Their work addresses issues of sustainability, inequity and poverty by building natural-resource management competence and supporting sustainable livelihoods. One of their current projects, supported by USAID, focuses on the Olifants River and the way in which people living in South Africa and Mozambique depend on the Olifants and its contributing waterways. It aims to improve water security and resource management in support of the healthy ecosystems to sustain livelihoods and resilient economic development in the catchment.

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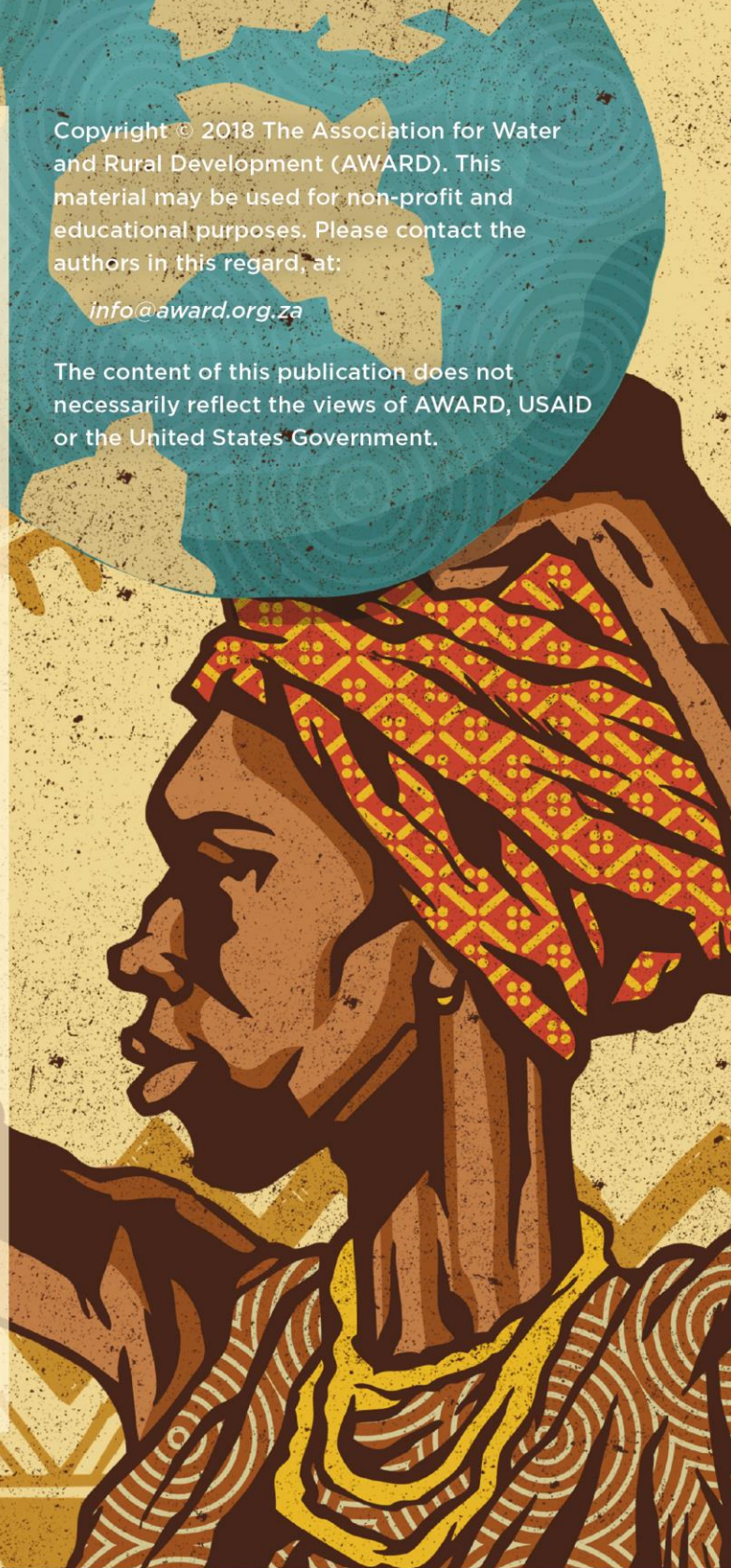
## About USAID: RESILIM-O

USAID: RESILIM-O focuses on the Olifants River Basin and the way in which people living in South Africa and Mozambique depend on the Olifants and its contributing waterways. It aims to improve water security and resource management in support of the healthy ecosystems that support livelihoods and resilient economic development in the catchment. The 5-year programme, involving the South African and Mozambican portions of the Olifants catchment, is being implemented by the Association for Water and Rural Development (AWARD) and is funded by USAID Southern Africa.

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