



Behavior change is something that cannot happen in isolation. Nor can it be imposed on people in a top-down manner. Successful behavior change reaches and engages a broad group of individuals in the community and considers their opinions, needs and values.

Community engagement involves working collaboratively with and through groups of individuals, organizations and institutions in your community that may be affected, interested or concerned by the issue you are addressing. These individuals and organizations are also referred to as stakeholders.

There are different levels at which communities can be engaged:

Being informed

Being asked

Commenting on decisions

Developing solutions

Delivering services



Consultation

Engagement

Partnership

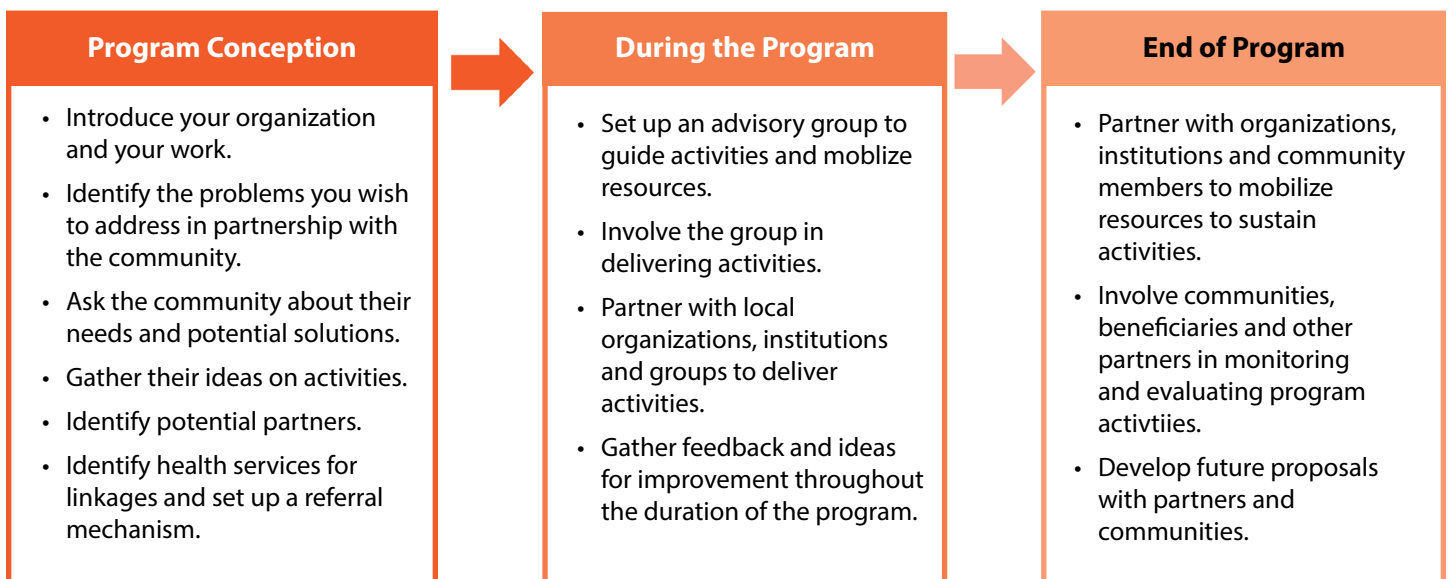
All these levels of involvement are important and can play a role in social and behavior change communication (SBCC) programs. However, aiming for engagement and partnership is a more powerful way of facilitating change and making it last even after a project has ended.

It is important to start communicating with and involving community members and stakeholders from program conception. Start by thinking about who needs to know about the program and who can provide advice and direction to implement it in ways that will be accepted and successful.

These may include:

- Local residents
- Community and religious leaders
- Community-based organizations (CBO) and faith-based organizations (FBO)
- Health providers
- Parents and guardians
- Young people
- Teachers and education officials
- The police
- Social workers
- Community groups

Communities can be engaged in different ways at different stages of your program. The diagram below provides some examples of how communities can be involved throughout the life of your program.



Tips for Successful Community Engagement

- **Know why you are engaging the community:** What is the purpose of the engagement effort? Is it to collect data, generate ideas, rally support or obtain active involvement from specific community members?
- **Know the community:** What are the economic conditions of the community, the demographic trends, political structures and dominant norms and values? What is the protocol for approaching that community? Has the community experienced engagement efforts before? How did it respond?
- **Be clear about the individuals, populations and communities to engage:** Who are the important stakeholders? Who needs to be informed? Whose support does the program need?
- **Build trust:** Seek to build relationships and partnerships with formal and informal leaderships, and with local organizations that are already respected by the community.
- **Respect the opinion, needs and ideas of the community:** Make sure talking to the community is not just tokenistic. Listen to their concerns, needs and ideas, and respond to them. If the project does not have the resources to deliver what they need, let them know and, if possible, support them in finding alternative solutions.
- **Respect the diversity of the community:** Diversity may be related to economics, education, employment and health status; and differences in culture, language, age and interests. Be aware of this diversity and develop strategies to engage with all relevant groups.

Establishing an Advisory Group

While community engagement is important for ensuring that programs are accepted and creating a supportive environment for change, advisory groups are helpful in

guiding the development of specific activities.

An advisory group is best established during the design phase of a project, after identifying a priority issue and potential audiences. The group should provide ideas and feedback on program design, messaging, implementation and evaluation throughout the life of the SBCC program.

Generally, members of an advisory group meet regularly to review program implementation and activities. More time and commitment is therefore required from them, than from organizations and institutions engaged through community engagement efforts.

Advisory groups are a great opportunity for ensuring the perspectives of young people are always considered. Make sure your advisory group includes representatives of the youth segment you are trying to reach.

Tips for Establishing an Advisory Group:

- **Consider five to ten people:** Include those who bring unique knowledge, perspectives and skills to complement those of the program staff.
- **Be strategic about who to include:** Invite those who are supportive of the program and willing to provide guidance and assistance, including speaking publicly and advocating for the program.
- **Include a range of expertise and experience:** Include representatives of the program's primary and secondary audiences, representatives of organizations working on similar issues and other relevant stakeholders who can provide guidance on specific activities.
- **Establish objectives for the group's involvement:** Be clear on the expectations of each member and the time period they are expected to serve (i.e., attend meetings, provide feedback, assist in recruiting research participants for pretesting).

A Note on Compensation

Whether community members are invited to share their ideas in a one-off event, or whether they are engaged through regular advisory group meetings, it is important to acknowledge that people are giving up their time and show appreciation.

This does not need to be a monetary compensation, but it may constitute an expense for the program, so be sure to plan in advance. Some ideas include:

- Offer light refreshments during the meeting.
- Provide active advisory group members with visible recognition that they are involved, such as t-shirts, caps and bags with the program logo, an ID card, etc.
- Give training to advisory group members in specific skills and include a certificate.
- Reimburse transport and phone costs.
- Organize occasional events to celebrate successes and express gratitude.

Monetary compensation may attract people who are motivated by money, rather than by the program. It is very important to rally the support of committed individuals who believe in what the program is trying to achieve, so consider carefully whether money is the most suitable compensation.