



THE UNIVERSITY OF ARIZONA

Cooperative Extension



az2025

September 2023

Community Engagement for Cooperative Extension: Who Is and Is Not Participating in Community Engagement?

Series Publication 3 of 7

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Cooperative Extension professionals are well-positioned to serve as ‘community conveners.’

Many communities face critical issues, such as how to develop sustainable food systems, assure economic development, and promote community health. Effectively addressing these issues requires engaging the community members most impacted by them in efforts to develop solutions. It is also important to include the multiple stakeholders who work on local issues and who serve affected community members.

The University of Arizona’s Cooperative Extension (Extension) has a history of working across many sectors that impact key community issues, engaging policymakers, industry leaders, local businesses, educators, and non-profit organizations, among others. This experience makes Extension well positioned to work with diverse stakeholders and community members to develop programs and address policy, systems, and environmental change to promote thriving and sustainable communities across Arizona.¹ In 2021, national Cooperative Extension released their updated National Framework for Health Equity and Well-Being. The framework centers Extension as a ‘community convener,’ bringing together partners across diverse sectors to leverage their unique assets and to work toward common goals.² Bringing together the right people to improve communities is key to Extension’s community engagement efforts.

A tool for thinking about key stakeholders in your community

Actor mapping is a method of visually depicting key individuals and organizations that influence a program, their relationships to a given issue, and their relationships to one another.³ It can help illustrate who you are engaging with in the community to inform priorities and programming. This article outlines a series of actor mapping reflections aimed at identifying who in your community you are currently engaging and potential gaps in your engagement. This is meant to be a hands-on experience, so we recommend that you print a copy of this article to work through the exercises. It may also be valuable to do these reflections collaboratively with other members of your team. The actor mapping process in this article was adapted from actor mapping tools originally developed by FSG and the Collective Impact Forum (see Resources at the end of the article).

1. What are your community and target issues?

Recognizing that Extension work spans numerous communities and issues of importance, we recommend that for this reflection you choose one community and one specific issue where community engagement is particularly important. This process can then be repeated for other communities and issues. The community can be as small as a neighborhood or specific school or as large as the entire county. By defining the community clearly, you will be better able to understand how your current

community engagement efforts represent that community. The issue you are addressing can similarly range in its specificity. What are the intended outcomes of your work in this community? What do you hope to impact as a result of your programs or policy work? Are you working to improve college readiness in youth? Reduce food insecurity in rural families? Promote environmental stewardship among small-scale farmers?

Target community and target issue:

2. What professional sectors need to be involved in this issue?

Particularly when working on policy, systems, and environmental change, effectively tackling complex community issues requires working collaboratively across professional sectors. Professional sectors can be broken down in a number of ways that include both private and public industries; some examples include agriculture, commercial businesses, construction, education, energy, entertainment, forestry, government, healthcare, information technology, manufacturing, military, mining, non-profits, retail, services, and transportation. These examples can be broken down further. For instance, education could include pre-K, K-12, college and university, vocational, out-of-school time, and others. There is no exact list—the goal is to think creatively about the unique skills and resources of each sector and how they could be involved in making community change.

It is also important to engage influential community members who may not hold formal professional titles but have strong connections in the community and lived experience with the issues you are working to address. You may want to consider naming one sector “influential community members” to account for that.

Thinking of the target issue you just identified, list 8 to 10 sectors that could be involved in effectively addressing the issue. Think outside of the box!

Sectors involved in the issue:

3. Who is already participating in your community engagement efforts?

First, it is important to determine who you are already engaging with in your community engagement efforts. Using the following questions, try to generate a list of at least 10 key individuals, community groups, and/or organizations that influence your work in the community on your target issue.

- Who do you actively work with in the community?
- Whose feedback do you seek out from the community?
- Who informs you of community priorities and activities?
- Who attends your events?
- Who sits on your advisory boards or committees?

List of individuals, community groups, and organizations you are currently engaging:

4. How well do the people you are already engaging reflect the community affected by the issue?

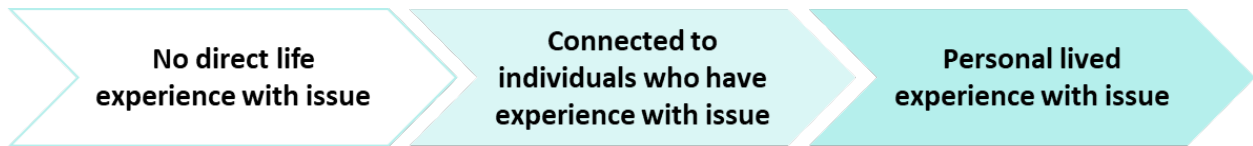
Now consider, how do the people and groups you are already engaging reflect the community you are intending to serve? How directly do they experience the issue you are intending to address? Effective community engagement practices involve engaging individuals most directly impacted by the issues Extension seeks to address.

Using the list of partners generated, consider the following three facets of experience and representation. Reflection space is provided after each facet to note where partners fall along each continuum.

Issue Experience

Have these individuals been impacted by the issue you are working to address? Do they have direct life experience or have close connections with others who do, such as friends or family? Do they support individuals with lived experience in their work?

For example, if you are working on promoting nutrition in early care settings, who are you seeking input from in determining your priorities? Are you including parents or caregivers with young children?

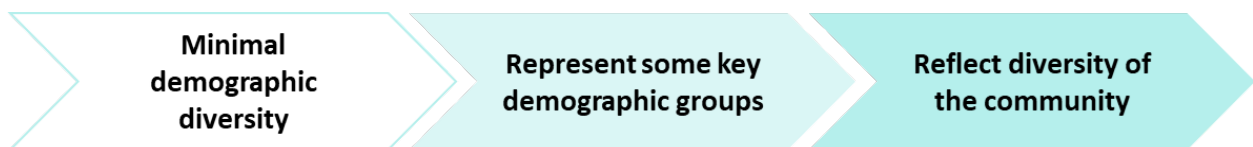


Reflection:

Demographic Representation

Do these individuals reflect the demographics and diversity of the community? Are there particular demographic groups (e.g., race/ethnicity, language, age, education level) that are critical to engage based on the target issue? Are you engaging members of groups who have been historically excluded from decision-making processes?

For example, if you are working on developing farming and agriculture initiatives, are members of migrant farmworker communities included in your advisory committees, providing direction and oversight?



Reflection:

Geographic Representation

Finally, how well do these individuals represent the community geographically? Are they from outside the community? Do they largely live and work in the most populated part of this community? Do they include individuals who live in more rural or remote parts of the community? Particularly for initiatives aimed at serving an entire county, you should consider the many distinct communities within the county and how their feedback and guidance is gathered.



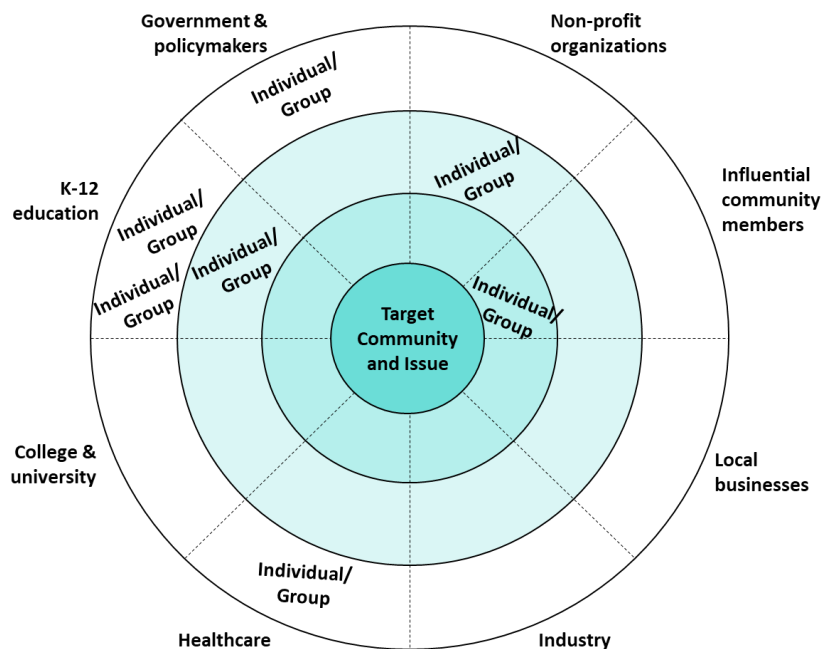
Reflection:

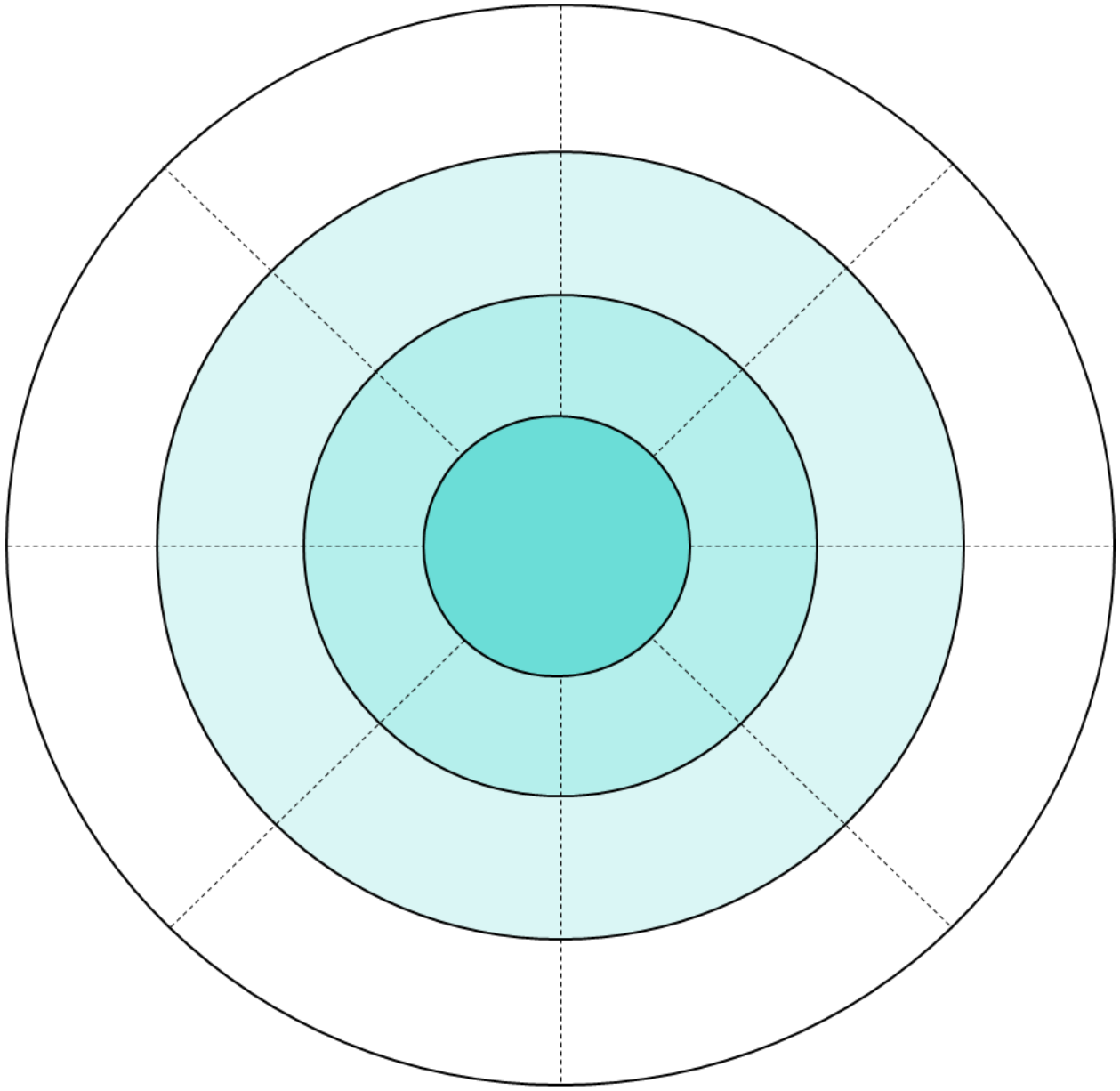
Developing an Actor Map

An Actor Map can be used to visualize the various individuals, groups, and organizations informing your work, their closeness to the community and issue you are working to address, and the sectors they represent. On the next page, you will find a blank actor map to record the individuals and groups you identified above. We have provided an example actor map below to show how to map each component.

- 1. Community and Issue:** First, add the community and issue (from number 1 above) to the center of the bullseye.
- 2. Sectors:** Then, take the sectors you identified in number 2 above, and note those around the outside of the diagram, so that each sector has its own piece of the “pie.”

3. Individuals/Groups: Finally, add each individual or group you identified in number 3 above to the diagram. The closer you place them to the center of the bullseye, the more directly they represent your target community and issue. Consider their relevance based on the three facets of experience you reflected upon (Issue Experience, Demographic Representation, and Geographic Representation).





Who is missing from your actor map?

Reviewing your actor map, can you think of any individuals or groups that you are not currently engaging who should be included? Can you identify particular communities that are affected by the issue you are working to address but are not currently informing your work? Or additional sectors influencing the issue that you do not yet work with? Strategies to improve representation in your community engagement efforts are addressed in [Article 4 of this series](#).

Reflection:

Continuation of the Community Engagement Series

This is the third article of a seven part-series on community engagement, a collaboration between the [University of Arizona's School of Nutritional Sciences & Wellness - Cooperative Extension, SNAP-Ed](#) (UA SNAP-Ed) and the [Community Research, Evaluation, and Development \(CRED\) team](#) from the Norton School of Human Ecology. The publications reflect the concepts of seven [interactive, online learning modules about community engagement](#) that were developed by the UA SNAP-Ed and the CRED team. The next publication in this series will focus on strategies to improve representation in community engagement efforts.

The full Community Engagement in Cooperative Extension article series includes:

1. What is Community Engagement?
2. Using Interactive Maps to Understand Communities
3. Who is and is not Participating in Community Engagement?
4. Strategies to Improve Representation
5. Spectrum of Public Participation: Inform and Consult
6. Spectrum of Public Participation: Involve
7. Spectrum of Public Participation: Collaborate and Community Directs

All articles in the series are available at the following link:

[Community Engagement in Cooperative Extension Series](#)

Citations

1. Walsh, M., John, D., Peritore, N., Morris, A., Bird, C., Ceraso, M., Eichberger, S., Novotny, R., Stephenson, L., Stluka, S., & Riportella, R. (2018). Health in all policies: Working across sectors in Cooperative Extension to promote health for all. *Journal of Human Sciences and Extension*, 6(2). <https://www.jhseonline.com/article/view/718>. Accessed September 17, 2021.
2. Extension Committee on Organization and Policy Health Innovation Task Force. (2021). Cooperative Extension's National Framework for Health Equity and Well-Being. <https://www.aplu.org/members/commissions/food-environment-and-renewable-resources/board-on-agriculture-assembly/cooperative-extension-section/ecop-members/ecop-documents/2021%20EquityHealth%20Full.pdf>. Accessed April 7, 2022.
3. Gopal, S. G., & Clarke, T. (n.d.). Guide to actor mapping. <https://www.fsg.org/tools-and-resources/guide-actor-mapping>. Accessed September 17, 2021.

Resources

[FSG - Guide to Actor Mapping](#)



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This information has been reviewed by
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extension.arizona.edu/pubs/az2025-2023.pdf

Other titles from this series can be found at:

extension.arizona.edu/pubs/community-engagement-cooperative-extension-series

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Edward C. Martin, Interim Director, Extension, Division of Agriculture, Life and Veterinary Sciences, and Cooperative Extension, The University of Arizona.

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