



SMARCO

SMART Communities Skills
Development in Europe

Work with Communities

Unit 3 – Group Dynamics,
Barriers & Co-Creation

escola profissional
FORAVE



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Unit 3 – Aim and objectives

- This unit examines how group dynamics, power relations and social behaviour influence community engagement processes. Learners explore the factors that shape collective interaction—such as roles, norms, communication patterns and informal hierarchies—and how these can either enable or hinder participation. The unit also introduces common barriers to engagement, including structural, psychological and contextual obstacles, and presents co-creation principles and facilitation practices that support collaborative problem-solving. Its aim is to develop the ability to understand group processes, recognise engagement challenges, and apply approaches that foster constructive, inclusive and co-created community outcomes.



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Unit 3 – Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit, learners will be able to:

- Define core concepts related to group dynamics, power relations and collective behaviour in community engagement contexts.
- Describe how roles, norms, communication patterns and informal hierarchies influence group interaction and participation outcomes.
- Identify and classify different types of engagement barriers—including structural, psychological and contextual obstacles—and understand their effects on group processes.
- Analyze co-creation principles and facilitation practices that support collaborative problem-solving and inclusive engagement in community processes.



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Unit 3 – Structure and Flow



Group Behaviour

Patterns of interaction and influence within collaborative settings



Participation Barriers

Obstacles that prevent meaningful community engagement



Co-Creation Practices

Methods that enable communities to work together effectively



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What Are Group Dynamics?

Group dynamics refer to the **patterns of interaction, influence, and behaviour** that emerge when people work together towards shared objectives.

These patterns determine how effectively groups function, make decisions, and achieve their goals in participatory contexts.



 Interaction

 Influence

 Behaviour



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Roles Within Groups

Participants naturally adopt different roles during collaborative processes.

Recognising these roles helps facilitators balance participation and ensure all voices contribute meaningfully.



Leaders

Guide discussions and propose directions



Supporters

Build consensus and encourage others



Critics

Challenge assumptions and improve ideas



Observers

Listen carefully and contribute selectively



Mediators

Bridge differences and resolve tensions



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Positive Group Dynamics



Cooperation

Participants work together constructively, supporting collective progress



Mutual Respect

All contributions are valued regardless of background or status



Constructive Dialogue

Open conversation that builds understanding and explores solutions



Balanced Participation

Speaking time and influence are distributed fairly across the group



Shared Goals

Clear common objectives that unite participants' efforts



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Negative Group Dynamics

Harmful patterns can undermine participation and prevent groups from achieving their potential. Awareness helps facilitators intervene early.

Dominance

One or few individuals monopolise discussion and decision-making

Unresolved Conflict

Tensions escalate without productive resolution mechanisms

Exclusion

Certain voices or perspectives are systematically marginalised

Silence

Participants withdraw, withhold views, or disengage emotionally

Misinformation

False or incomplete information distorts the group's understanding

Fragmentation

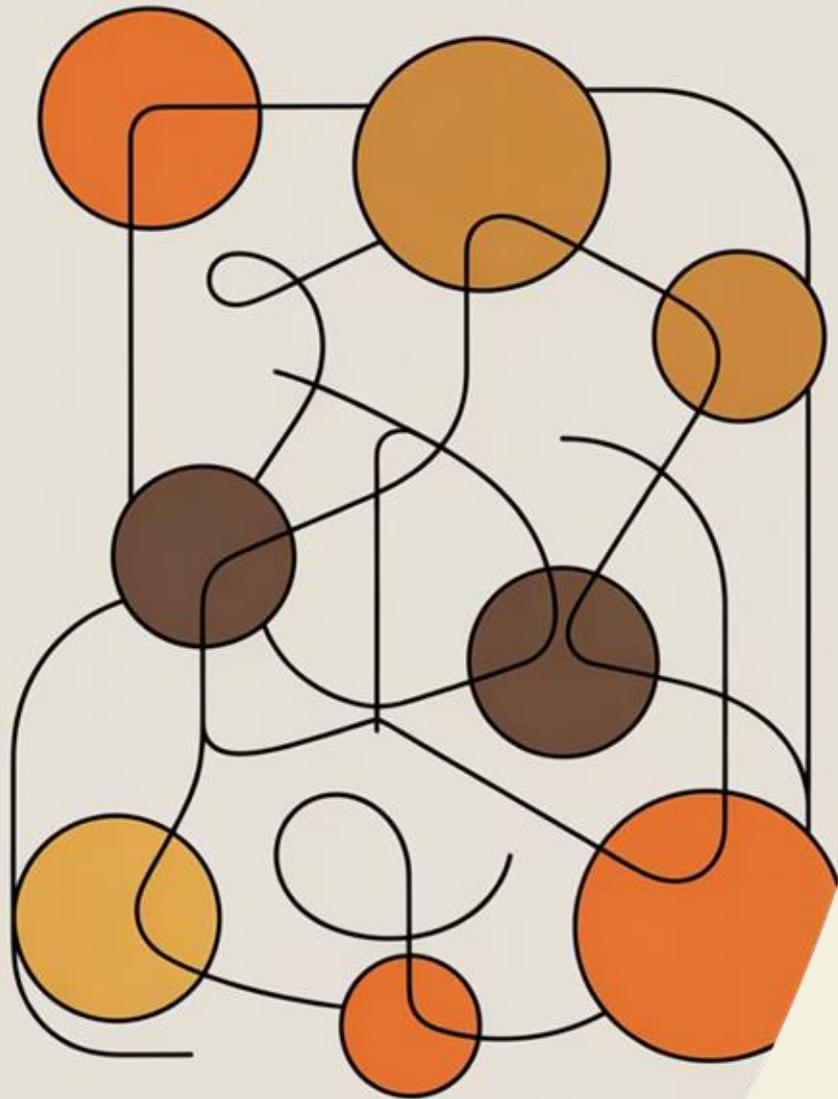
The group splinters into competing factions without cohesion



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Power Relations in Groups



Critical Questions

- Who influences decisions?
- Who is heard?
- Who is overlooked?
- How is authority distributed?

Power shapes participation in subtle and overt ways. Understanding power relations is essential for creating genuinely inclusive processes. Formal authority, social status, expertise, and communication skills all contribute to unequal influence within groups. Effective facilitation actively redistributes voice and decision-making capacity.



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Barriers to Engagement

Digital Divide

Unequal access to technology and digital literacy skills

Lack of Trust

Scepticism towards institutions or past broken promises

Social Inequalities

Economic, cultural, or language differences that exclude

Time Constraints

Work, care responsibilities, or scheduling conflicts

Inaccessible Processes

Complex language, inconvenient locations, or poor communication



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Psychological Barriers

Internal obstacles can prevent individuals from participating fully, even when external conditions are favourable.

Fear of Judgement

Worry about being criticised or dismissed by others

1

Past Negative Experiences

Previous participation that felt tokenistic or fruitless

2

3

4

Low Confidence

Feeling unqualified or that one's opinion doesn't matter

Emotional Fatigue

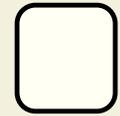
Exhaustion from ongoing challenges or repeated consultation



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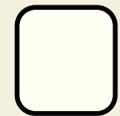


Structural Barriers



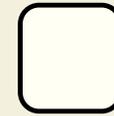
Rigid Processes

Inflexible procedures that don't adapt to community needs



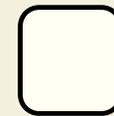
Poor Facilitation

Inadequately trained facilitators or unbalanced moderation



Unclear Objectives

Ambiguous goals that leave participants confused about purpose



Lack of Transparency

Decisions made behind closed doors without accountability



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The Role of Facilitators

Professional facilitators create conditions for productive dialogue, drawing on principles from the International Association of Facilitators (IAF).



Support Open Dialogue

Create safe space for honest, respectful exchange of views



Ensure Respect

Maintain constructive atmosphere and intervene when needed



Balance Voices

Ensure all participants have opportunity to contribute meaningfully



Guide Process

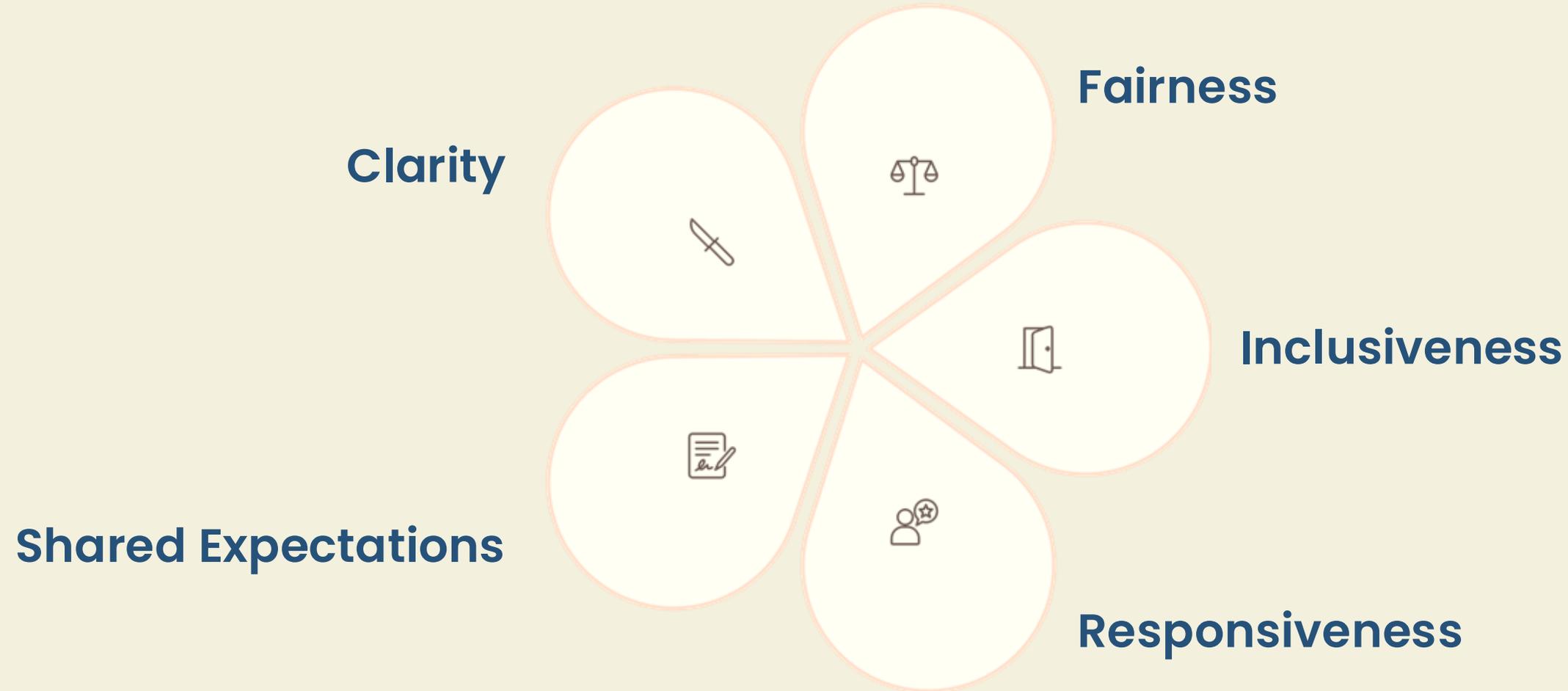
Keep discussions focused whilst allowing natural exploration



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Conditions for Meaningful Engagement



When these conditions are present, participants feel valued and are more likely to engage authentically in collaborative processes.



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What Is Co-Creation?



Co-creation is a collaborative process in which communities and institutions work together as equal partners to design solutions, services, or policies.

Rather than consulting communities after decisions are made, co-creation involves them from the beginning, combining lived experience with professional expertise.



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Benefits of Co-Creation

1

Better Ideas

Diverse perspectives generate more innovative and practical solutions

2

Stronger Ownership

Communities feel invested in outcomes they helped create

3

Greater Legitimacy

Decisions gain credibility when shaped through inclusive processes

4

Improved Impact

Solutions better address real needs and achieve lasting change



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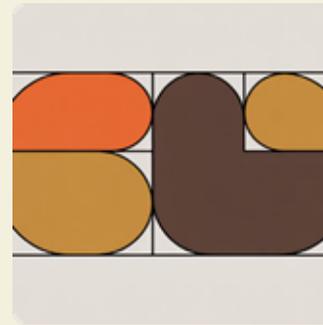


Co-Creation Methods



Collaborative Workshops

Structured sessions bringing stakeholders together



Rapid Prototyping

Quick testing of ideas with community feedback



Living Labs

Real-world testing environments with users



Participatory Mapping

Community knowledge visualised spatially



Service Design Tools

Journey maps, personas, and blueprints



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Challenges of Co-Creation



Conflicting Interests

Different stakeholders may have incompatible goals or priorities



Unequal Knowledge

Power imbalances from expertise or information asymmetries



Time Scarcity

Meaningful co-creation requires sustained commitment and resources



Low Motivation

Participants may lose interest without visible progress



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Overcoming Co-Creation Challenges



Clear Process Design

Structured approach with defined stages and outcomes



Grounded Expectations

Honest communication about what's possible



Skilled Facilitation

Professional support to navigate complexity



Incremental Trust

Small wins that build confidence step by step



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Practical Considerations



Encourage Diversity

Actively recruit participants from different backgrounds and perspectives



Document Insights

Capture ideas, decisions, and rationale throughout the process



Provide Feedback

Show how contributions influenced outcomes and explain decisions



Ensure Continuity

Plan for sustained engagement beyond individual sessions



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Practical Exercise

Task for Participants

Identify one barrier to participation that you have observed in your own community or professional context.

Then, propose a co-creation practice or facilitation technique that could help address this barrier.

Consider:

- What is the nature of the barrier? (psychological, structural, cultural, technical)
- Who is most affected by this barrier?
- What resources or support would be needed to implement your proposed solution?
- How would you measure whether the barrier has been reduced?

Discuss your findings with colleagues or in small groups.



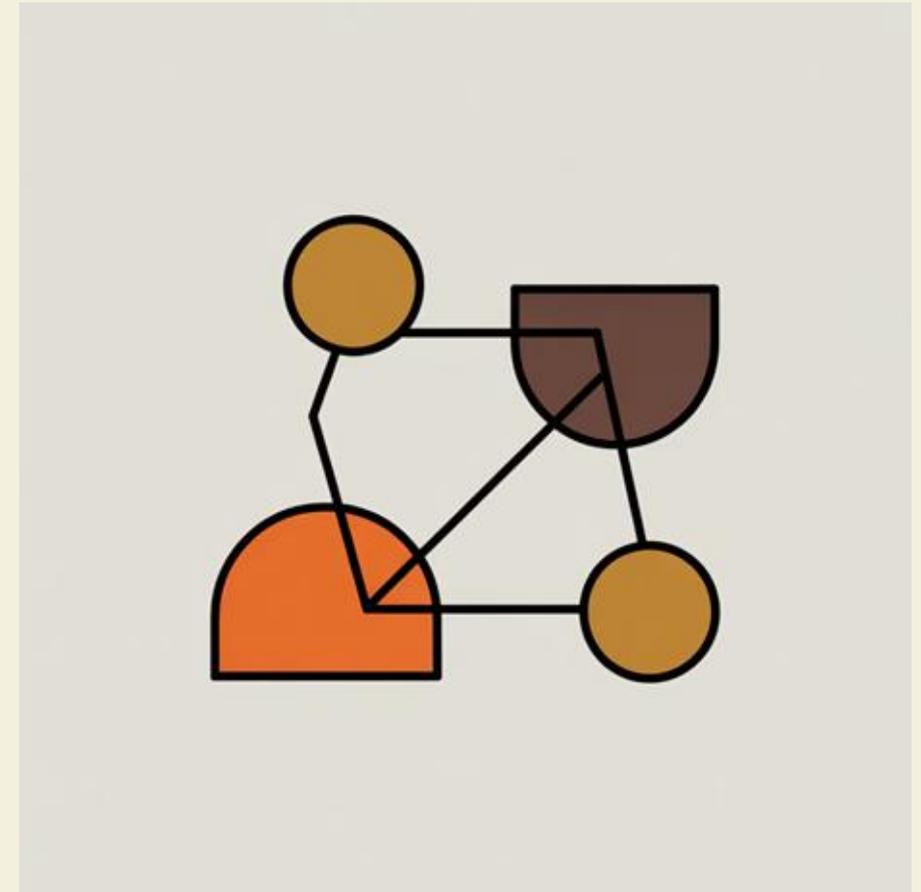
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Conclusion

Understanding group dynamics and embracing co-creation approaches strengthens our capacity for meaningful collaboration.

By recognizing barriers, facilitating inclusively, and designing participatory processes thoughtfully, we enable communities and institutions to work together effectively towards better, community-centred solutions.



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Further Reading

- International Association of Facilitators (IAF). Guidelines for Effective Facilitation.
- Sanders, E., & Stappers, P. (2014). Co-Creation and Participatory Design Methods.
- IDEO. Human-Centred Design Toolkit.
- Design Council (UK). Co-Design and Civic Innovation.
- Nesta (UK). Collective Intelligence for Public Good.
- UN-Habitat. Participatory Design Toolkit.



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Unit Completed - What's Next?

To consolidate your learning and reflect on the key concepts covered, please take a moment to complete this quiz.

Your feedback and results will help you track your progress and support continuous improvement of the training experience.

By completing this quiz, you will also become eligible to receive a certificate of successful training completion.

Click the [link](#) to begin the quiz!



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