

Consultative Community Engagement



Cherry Hill Community — Baltimore City, Maryland

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One of the major challenges facing university community engagement efforts is how to address structural roots of social problems. This document provides a careful look into how a shura (consultation) process can be used to accomplish this.

Briefly, this is a structured and repeatable process made available via an online platform named [ShuraForAll](#). It is designed to make it easy for all stakeholders to experience psychological safety when openly contributing their ideas while working toward problem solutions.

The major elements of the process are described as follows.

Shura set up

The person who starts the shura is responsible for explaining its context and providing a timeline for completing its phases of activities.

Discuss phase

Following the shura set up, all participants share their points of view on the issue as they recommend various courses of action to take. They are expected to provide evidence in the form of linked references or uploaded files to support their viewpoints.

Decide phase

After the discussion time period has ended, each person should select their preferred course of action based on their best judgment. The tool will compile selections and present the results to everyone. Once the course of action is agreed on, the shura effort moves to the next phase.

Deliver phase

This is where participants try to put the selected course of action into motion by setting objectives and carrying out action steps. Each person either joins an existing team or starts a new team and then performs the work. ShuraForAll charts the progress along the way, letting everyone know how things are going.

The effort of addressing the structural roots of a social problem starts by crafting a strategy to respond to a specific challenge. The basic components* are

A diagnosis: much like the work of a physician, after the real problem is recognized, there is the need to identify the aspects of the situation that are the most important ones to address.

A guiding policy: an overall approach that is selected to overcome the obstacles identified in the diagnosis.

Coherent actions: steps that are coordinated with each other to support the implementation of the guiding policy.

*Richard Rumelt (2011). *Good Strategy Bad Strategy*. Crown Business.

Trying to figure out the context of a problem is an essential part of any strategy. It's the best place to start. Let's walk through an example of how we might think about addressing the structural roots of a specific situation.

Cherry Hill Community

Located in the southern section of Baltimore City, the Cherry Hill community* is one of the most historic African American communities in the United States. It was established in the late 1940s when the Housing Authority of Baltimore City (HABC) selected it as the housing site for African American war workers.

*An abbreviated summary taken from [A Comprehensive Demographic Profile of the Cherry Hill Community](#) in Baltimore City prepared by The Institute for Urban Research, Morgan State University, 2015.

Several other options had been considered but they were opposed by Whites who did not want these workers and their families moving too close to their neighborhoods. Even though it was known that Cherry Hill was an unsuitable housing location due to the presence of industrial plants, polluted water, and the presence of the city incinerator, it was selected to become the first planned “Negro Suburb” in the nation.

Following the end of the war, the Cherry Hill homes were converted to low-income housing. According to a 1945 report by the HABC entitled, “Effects of the Post-War Program on Negro Housing”, there was a need to prevent the continued expansion of “Negro” communities. The solution was to make their current locations more densely populated.

Although the Federal Racial Relations Office warned HABC that such a plan would effectively convert a racially flexible area to one of racial exclusion and would reduce the land areas available for “Negro” residence, the HABC continued with their plan. They rejected 39 alternate locations, reasoning that Cherry Hill is the “only politically acceptable vacant land site for Negro housing.” HABC added another 632 units in 1952 and 360 units in 1956.

The situation was not an isolated event. It was just one in a series of unfair housing practices forced upon African Americans throughout Baltimore and the United States. The results of these kinds of institutional behaviors in housing and other areas which include employment, education, and healthcare, continue to negatively impact many segments of the population in the nation.

In the recommendations section of its study, the Institute for Urban Research noted that studies often contain findings that usually receive considerable attention by policy makers, followed by a flurry of public comment afterwards and then the final report is shelved.

This is what essentially happened for the Cherry Hill community.

Planning Efforts

Baltimore City developed a five year Cherry Hill Master Plan in 2008 which according to the Institute resulted in relatively little implementation. A subsequent effort in 2020 led to the creation of the Cherry Hill Transformation Plan.

It acknowledges that the quality of life for residents in Cherry Hill is a complex challenge. The major problem areas include safety concerns, education, existing workforce opportunities, access to healthcare, and limited access to amenities and healthy food.

These are a subset of the same problem areas highlighted in the 2008 plan. The projected implementation timeline for most of the proposed improvements is 2030.

What is causing these false starts and restarts? It seems that the challenge facing the Cherry Hill community is *ill-structured*. This means that the problem is not yet properly defined.

When this happens there is no obvious list of good approaches or actions. Even though broad community, city government, and business partner participation occurred in the efforts leading to the development of each plan, no solid diagnosis has yet to be deduced from the observed facts.

A good diagnosis for the situation should help draw attention to the crucial parts of a problem. It should help identify a domain where action steps should be taken.

So far, this has not happened for the Cherry Hill community. Evidence of this is provided by the fact that the main output from both plans is a laundry list of desired objectives: reduce poverty; reduce crime; prevent displacement; increase employment; improve educational attainment; and many others.

When using the ShuraForAll tool, the problem statement is expected to be explained in the Overview section. This is where the shura process begins and the context of the effort is provided. Relevant documents are liberally attached.

Participants then move to the Discuss phase where everyone shares their points of view on the situation as they recommend various courses of action to take. If the problem statement as constructed lacks sufficient definition, then this condition usually becomes evident at this point.

In this case the suggested courses of action are disconnected and incoherent. Subsequently, there becomes a driving need to simplify the description of the situation to allow participants to make sense of things.

To fix this, the person who set up the shura should go back to the Overview section and improve the problem statement description. Based on the feedback provided in the Discuss phase, the revisions should clarify the important factors that everyone should focus on. Once the clarifications have been documented, participants can now revise their previous recommendations and add new comments as desired.

One of the key benefits derived from using the Discuss phase to document the various points of view and courses of action is that everyone can revisit the idea exchanges according to their convenience. Follow up questions and clarifications are added as needed.

This helps to reduce confusion over what was meant by what was stated. It also makes it easier to revise the problem statement and pick up the discussion in the light of new perspectives.

Once the Discuss phase reaches the assigned end date, the tool automatically transitions to the Decide phase. Here is where each participant selects their preferred recommended course of action.

The votes are tallied by the system and the results are displayed. At this point the tool transitions to the Deliver phase where the effort begins to self-assign objectives and the action steps needed to meet them.

A good course of action guides the effort in a certain direction. It provides an approach to solving the problem without defining exactly what needs to be done.

For example, the Cherry Hill endeavor could benefit from using the course of action “provide residential housing solutions that satisfies the needs of all community members.”

This approach would prioritize housing solutions over other actions and facilitate learning about the interactions among housing, crime, poverty, employment, and others. It could help create actions that are likely to be more easily coordinated and concentrated, and therefore more effective.

We refer to these types of actions as *coherent actions*. They reinforce each other and add strength to a strategy. A good strategy consists of coherent actions that are designed to achieve feasible objectives.

It usually is too difficult to take a complex problem head on. That is, it is better to reduce complexity by setting objectives that are within reach of available resources, especially time. This is what is meant by feasible objectives.

Imagine the distrust that has built up since the first Cherry Hill community plan in 2008 and the most recent one in 2020. To avoid this in university community engagements it is important for shura participants to self-assign feasible objectives and coherent action steps that simplify complex problems. The number of objectives should be small, about two or three. This significantly helps to focus the effort.

In the Deliver phase all participants are expected to work in teams to achieve objectives. We use teams because we can solve problems best when we interchange ideas, challenge each other's facts and conclusions, and cross-check judgments.

In this setting we develop a questioning approach. Rather than assuming that we are on a path that leads to the desired result, we constantly test our findings and make revisions where needed.

Each team is made up of at least three participants with one person designated as the team lead. This person is responsible for the overall performance of the work of the team, coaches other team members, and makes the final decision on all matters requiring team input.

The formation of a team does not have to go through a formal process. The ShuraForAll tool allows teams to form “on demand” according to the situation. Any shura participant can start a team.

Other participants join a team by selecting the team from the list of existing teams, and then entering an action step description that they want to carry out. Each team member is responsible for completing the action steps that are self-assigned in this way.

As work is performed an Achieve Rate metric is automatically calculated by the tool. It helps everyone understand the extent to which each person stays focused on the most important parts of the work.

Any participant can learn how well an individual or a team is performing by viewing their Achieve Rate. Each person's Achieve Rate for the team that they are working on appears next to the person's name. The tool also calculates the composite Achieve Rate for all participants who are working on each objective.

Because there are so many ways to achieve social impacts, there are many ways to evaluate progress toward attaining them. In this document we will reference the [Carnegie Engagement Elective Classification](#) as an assessment tool.

It is a voluntary comparative scheme for American universities involved in community engagement work. Universities provide documented evidences of the commitment to community engagement that are demonstrated across the breadth of the institution.

With regard to using ShuraForAll, social impact integration begins in the Overview section. Depending on the problem statement description, the shura initiator should include relevant impact indicators such as capability development, expansion of resources, and creation of economic opportunities.

This part of the effort is different from determining courses of action (guiding policy) and setting feasible objectives and assigning action steps to achieving them (coherent actions). Including impact indicators is intended to communicate desired long-term consequences.

These indicators can be the basis for creating measures that apply to society, community resources, or the economic environment.

For example, returning to the Cherry Hill Community effort, if one of the objectives is “improve housing living conditions,” then an impact indicator could be “expansion of resources.” The associated measure might be “count of new sources of funding.”

Solving complex social problems usually requires the participation of a collection of people with a complementary set of diverse skills. At the center of the effort is working side by side with community members while making effective use of community resources.

Since each university community engagement is unique, a robust and flexible tool is needed to address the complexities of every one of them. Add to this the requirement to manage interactions among participants over extended time periods, it becomes easier to understand why universities find it difficult to meet the expectations of all stakeholders.

What shapes this work is a shura (consultation) process in which all participants have access to an online platform named [ShuraForAll](#). The process is structured and repeatable and supports the development and implementation of problem solving strategies.