

The C-Factor method

by Frank Tillema

The method that we use in Utrecht was originally developed by national government under the name 'Factor C'. In addition to being an extensive toolbox, it is above all a way of thinking that means incorporating communicative aspects as an integral part of the policy development process from the very outset, just as you would the legal or financial aspects. In Utrecht, we have developed this method as the Utrecht Standard for Participation. We will take you through the five steps of the Standard for Participation in a workshop. In order to exchange experiences and develop the Standard further, we maintain close contact with national government and an extensive network of municipalities.

1. Force-field analysis

We begin by conducting a force-field analysis or analysis of the surrounding situation. Which people and parties are involved? How do they relate to the issue? We will look at all the stakeholders, what their interests are, what influence they have, their opinion of the project and how important they are to the success of the project. Stakeholders include, for example, current or future residents, those living in the surrounding area, business people, students, sportsmen and women, the project developer, action groups, social organizations, advisory boards and neighbourhood councils. Other bodies such as the Municipal Executive, the Municipal Council, specialist services and other departments will also be involved. The (assistant) neighbourhood manager will contribute his/her local knowledge and experience and bring in his/her network of contacts with residents, interests groups and other networks.

There are various ways of making full use of these. A force-field analysis is almost always useful and focuses on the interests of various parties and on the level of trust. A network analysis focuses on who is in contact with whom and how the parties are interconnected. And if you want still further depth, you can opt for an argumentation analysis. At the initial meeting, we look at which questions are relevant to your issue and which information is already available. On that basis, we can choose one or more methods of analysis.

2. Determine the level of participation:

The second step forms the basis for the participation strategy, and involves the four levels of the Utrecht participation ladder (information, consultation, advice and co-production). In short, who are we going to inform, who are we going to consult, who are we going to ask for advice, and who are we going to work together with on an equal basis?

3. Identify the actors and a core message for each

Using the outcome of the first two steps, we then develop core messages for the various actors. By putting yourself in the shoes of the various parties, you can look at the issue from their perspective and experience. For example, do they share your analysis of the problem? How do they view the issue? What are their interests or objections? Subsequently, we examine whether our approach has produced enough answers or whether there are still unanswered questions. In some cases, this can be a reason to make changes to the policy or to tighten it. For example, we may discover that young people from families on the minimum income often come from broken homes, and thus often travel backwards and forwards between two homes, meaning that they will get more out of a laptop than they would out of a PC. In this way, we can obtain the building blocks for a core message: a coherent argument that takes account of the questions, expectations or frames of important actors to the maximum extent. The core message varies for all actors and will also change at each successive stage.

This section consists of the following steps:

- Determine the task
- Choose a target group
- Put yourself in your target group's position (we use the 'criticize/replicate' method for this).
- Cross the bridge
- Write the core message according to a fixed line of reasoning (as with the drafting of a municipal advisory paper)

4. Timetable

Using the different phases of the project or policy development plan, and on the basis of logical timing for the various parties, you can design a joint timetable for the opportunities for participation and communication.

5. Means

Once the actors have been identified and the timetable has been drawn up, the means of participation then needs to be chosen. The desire of residents and the municipality to involve stakeholders more closely also has implications for the means of participation. As well as the traditional methods (such as local newsletters, consultation evenings and sounding board groups), you could also consider using more innovative methods such as internet panels, digital debates or 'pressure cookers' to reach out to other target groups and gain better results. A neighbourhood council advisory paper is also a possibility. More information (only in Dutch) about means of participation can be found on www.participedia.nl.