

Review

Community Engagement Strategies in Enhancing General Social Services

Mofareh Dukhi Albaqami, Hussain Mohammed Alqahtani, Khalil Eid Alharbi, Alotaibi, Abdulrahman Muslim Almutairi

Social Service Specialist, PSMMC, Riyadh Saudi Arabia

Corresponding Author:

Mofareh Dukhi Albaqami

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Abstract:

Background: Community engagement is increasingly recognized as a vital approach in strengthening general social services by ensuring inclusivity, equity, and sustainability. **Methodology:** This review synthesizes theoretical models, historical evolution, and practical frameworks of community engagement, examining strategies such as public dialogue, participatory planning, co-creation, educational outreach, digital engagement, and participatory research. Both needs-based and strengths-based approaches were considered to highlight their roles in service design and delivery. **Results:** Evidence indicates that effective engagement improves trust, social capital, cultural relevance, and accountability in service provision. Engagement levels ranging from community-oriented to community-owned models demonstrate varying impacts, with deeper community involvement fostering empowerment, resilience, and sustainable change. Success factors include tailoring approaches to context, building trust, empowering marginalized groups, and fostering collaborative partnerships. **Conclusion:** Community engagement is a transformative process in general social services, shifting the paradigm from top-down delivery to inclusive, community-driven models. By prioritizing local voices and co-ownership, engagement strategies enhance service responsiveness, promote social justice, and create sustainable pathways for improved social outcomes.

Keywords: Community engagement, social services, empowerment, participatory models, equity, sustainability, co-creation.

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1. Introduction

Community engagement has emerged as a foundational approach in enhancing the delivery and effectiveness of general social services worldwide. This review aims to explore the diverse strategies of community engagement, shedding light on their critical role in transforming social service provision. By integrating community voices and fostering collaborative partnerships, social service organizations can develop more responsive, equitable, and sustainable interventions that address the unique needs of their target populations. The scope of this review encompasses the examination of the frameworks, models, and tactics employed to engage communities effectively across various social service domains.(1) It covers the breadth of

community engagement practices from consultative dialogues and participatory decision-making to co-creation of programs and services with community members. The review also seeks to highlight the evidence supporting the impact of these strategies on service outcomes, social cohesion, and empowerment. By focusing on this topic, the review provides social service practitioners, policymakers, and researchers with an in-depth understanding of how community engagement operates as a dynamic and multi-faceted process. It underscores the necessity of transitioning away from top-down service delivery models towards approaches that prioritize community participation, partnership, and localized knowledge.

1.1. Importance of Community Engagement in Social Service Provision

The importance of community engagement in social service provision cannot be overstated. Social services address complex societal challenges such as poverty, inequality, health disparities, and social exclusion. These challenges are deeply rooted in social contexts and vary widely across different communities. Engaging communities is essential to ensure that social services are relevant, culturally appropriate, and tailored to actual needs rather than assumptions made by external actors. Community engagement is also fundamental to democratizing social services.(2) When communities are actively involved, they acquire a sense of ownership over programs and policies affecting them. This leads to enhanced trust, accountability, and transparency between service providers and beneficiaries. Engagement generates social capital—the networks of relationships and trust that facilitate cooperation for mutual benefit—and enhances community capacity to identify problems and implement solutions independently.

Moreover, community engagement empowers marginalized groups by amplifying their voices in decision-making processes that affect their lives. Inclusivity in engagement processes addresses disparities and promotes social justice, ensuring underrepresented populations participate in shaping the social services they depend upon. This emphasis on equity is crucial for reducing systemic barriers to access and improving health and social outcomes. Engagement strategies also foster innovation and sustainability in social service delivery.(3) Through participatory approaches like co-creation, services can integrate local expertise, traditions, and preferences, resulting in more innovative and effective interventions that are supported and upheld by the community. These partnerships encourage continuous dialogue and feedback mechanisms that adapt services to evolving needs and contexts, ensuring long-term impact.

From a practical standpoint, community engagement improves communication channels between service providers and populations, enhancing outreach, education, and uptake of services. Engaged communities are more likely to participate in preventative programs, adhere to interventions, and mobilize resources, which altogether contribute to better social outcomes.

2. Defining Community Engagement

Community engagement is broadly understood as the process by which organizations, institutions, and social service providers meaningfully involve communities in decision-making, planning, implementation, and evaluation of initiatives affecting them. It goes beyond mere consultation to active collaboration and partnership, fostering shared ownership and collective action.(4) At its core, community engagement empowers community members to have a voice, take control, and mobilize resources toward improving their social conditions. In the context of social services, community engagement encompasses a spectrum of interactions that range from informing and consulting to involving, collaborating, and co-leading. It is grounded in principles of inclusion, equity, mutual respect, and cultural relevance. Community engagement is often strength-based, emphasizing community assets, capacities, and social networks rather than deficits.

One comprehensive view, found in health communication and social service literature, describes community engagement as an approach that builds community capacity by involving local leaders and organizations to enhance social networks and connections. This approach promotes empowerment co-learning, skill exchange, and challenging systemic power structures to achieve desired social outcomes. Other vital concepts include critical consciousness, where the community engages in reflective dialogue to link root causes of issues with actionable solutions, and participation where communities create their own agenda based on their needs, resources, and power dynamics. These defining features collectively distinguish community engagement as a dynamic, inclusive, and reciprocal process integral to equitable social service provision. A further conceptual model, known as the Assessing Community Engagement (ACE) Model, highlights core principles for authentic engagement such as trust-building, bidirectional information flow, cultural centering, equity in financing, shared governance, and sustained relationships beyond single projects.(5) This model situates community engagement as essential for advancing health equity and systems transformation, underscoring the foundational role of respectful and enduring community partnerships.

2.1.Goals of Community Engagement in Social Services

The goals of community engagement in social services reflect a commitment to justice,

effectiveness, and sustainability. At a high level, these goals include: Enhancing Inclusion and Equity: Engaging diverse and marginalized populations ensures that social services do not perpetuate disparities but actively work to reduce them. An inclusive process respects multiple voices, especially those historically excluded, leading to fairer outcomes. Empowering Communities: Engagement builds the capacities of individuals and groups to influence decisions affecting their wellbeing. It promotes self-determination, active citizenship, and the development of leadership within communities. Improving Service Relevance and Responsiveness: Community involvement ensures that social services reflect the lived realities and priorities of the people they serve. This leads to culturally appropriate, context-specific, and practical interventions with higher acceptance and uptake. Building Trust and Accountability When communities participate in co-creating and overseeing social services, mutual trust emerges between providers and beneficiaries.(6) Transparency and shared authority enhance accountability and legitimacy of social programs. Strengthening Social Capital and Networks Engagement fosters social cohesion, collaborative relationships, and communal problem-solving. These networks serve as critical resources for ongoing support and resilience. Fostering Sustainability of Interventions: Community-driven initiatives are more likely to be sustained as they are embedded in existing local structures and supported by collective ownership. Enabling Systems Change and Advocacy: Through engagement, communities can challenge underlying structural inequalities and advocate for policy changes beyond immediate service delivery.

More concretely, community engagement in social services aims to create environments where communities can dialogue with service programs, empower themselves to address their own needs, recognize diversity and equity, partner in locally relevant responses, and link to external resources effectively. Success is measured not merely by problem resolution but by an increased capacity of communities to address future needs independently.

2.2. Historical Perspective and Evolution

The concept and practice of community engagement have evolved significantly over time, reflecting social, political, and technological changes. Historically, community engagement has roots in

grassroots organizing, civil rights movements, and social welfare initiatives aimed at addressing inequalities and catalyzing social change. In the early 20th century and before, community engagement often manifested as informal neighborhood associations, mutual aid societies, and early public health campaigns focusing on basic needs. These activities laid foundational practices of collective action and local problem-solving. In the mid-20th century, theorists like Saul Alinsky formalized community organizing strategies that emphasized empowering communities to assert political influence and challenge power dynamics. The civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s further catalyzed community engagement approaches focused on social justice and inclusion.(7)

Simultaneously, government programs institutionalized community input into social services. For instance, the U.S. Community Development Block Grant (CDBG) program (1974) introduced legal requirements for community participation in federal fund allocation decisions, embedding engagement in public policy. The National and Community Service Trust Act (1993) created AmeriCorps, embedding community service and engagement in national development efforts. The rise of digital technology and social media in the late 20th and early 21st centuries expanded community engagement horizons. Online platforms enabled broader, faster, and more diverse forms of community organizing, awareness-raising, and participatory governance.(8)

In the corporate world, the emergence of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) in the 2000s integrated community engagement into business models, recognizing the social and environmental responsibilities companies hold toward their local communities. Contemporary community engagement in social services is therefore a rich blend of these historical strands—grassroots activism, policy mandates, technological innovation, and cross-sector collaboration. Engagement today is both a strategy and a philosophy rooted in respect, equity, partnership, and empowerment, pursued through diverse methods tailored to the social, cultural, and political contexts of communities

3. Theoretical Frameworks and Models

Community engagement in social services can be understood through two predominant theoretical approaches: the needs-based and strengths-based

models. The needs-based approach focuses primarily on identifying deficits, problems, and deficiencies within communities or populations. It aims to address these unmet needs through targeted social service interventions and resources. This approach is more reactive, emphasizing the alleviation of problems such as poverty, illness, or social exclusion by providing remedial solutions.(8) It often involves external experts assessing the issues and designing programs to fill gaps. While this approach addresses critical concerns, by emphasizing limitations, it may inadvertently reinforce stigma or helplessness in communities.

In contrast, the strengths-based approach centers on recognizing and leveraging the existing assets, capabilities, experiences, and social networks within communities. This model builds on positive community attributes rather than deficits, empowering individuals and groups to mobilize their inherent resources to solve problems and improve their wellbeing. Strengths-based approaches foster ownership, resilience, and sustainable change by focusing on capacities rather than needs alone. They encourage co-learning, partnership, and mutual respect between social service providers and communities, integrating local knowledge and cultural relevance into program design and implementation.(8) Studies show that many interventions blend these approaches in “hybrid” models, addressing both urgent needs while harnessing community strengths for long-term impact. Needs-based strategies often provide critical entry points but are more effective when paired with strengths-based frameworks, which promote empowerment, participation, and sustainability.

3.1.Consensus vs Conflict Strategies

Another foundational dimension in community engagement theory differentiates between consensus and conflict strategies.

Consensus strategies promote collaborative dialogue, shared understanding, and agreement among community members and stakeholders. These approaches emphasize building trust, facilitating negotiation, and seeking common ground to reach decisions that accommodate multiple perspectives. Consensus approaches aim to create inclusive spaces where diverse voices contribute to collective problem-solving. (9)The processes typically involve structured meetings, deliberative forums, and consensus-building techniques to ensure broad participation and buy-in. This strategy is valuable in minimizing conflict costs

and fostering cooperative relationships necessary for sustainable social services.

Conversely, conflict strategies acknowledge and intentionally engage with power imbalances, disagreements, and contestations within communities or between communities and institutions. These strategies recognize that conflict can be a driver for social change and addressing structural inequalities. Conflict approaches may involve advocacy, protest, or confrontational tactics to challenge unjust systems or policies impeding equitable social service delivery.(10) Through exposing inequities and mobilizing marginalized voices, conflict strategies seek to redistribute power and resources more fairly. Many community engagement initiatives use a combination of both strategies depending on context, goals, and stakeholder dynamics. For example, a program may employ consensus-building to design service provisions while using conflict strategies to advocate policy shifts or resource allocations.(11) Studies documented conflict approaches primarily as needs-based and found consensus approaches dominate in community-oriented engagement, though hybrid models combining these strategies show promise in addressing complex social issues effectively.

3.2.Community Capacity, Empowerment, Participation, and Health Equity Frameworks

Community engagement further draws on theoretical frameworks emphasizing community capacity building, empowerment, participation, and health equity, which are interconnected concepts advancing social justice and effectiveness. Community Capacity refers to the collective assets and abilities of communities, including social networks, leadership, knowledge, resources, and organizational structures that enable them to address problems and improve well being. Interventions enhancing community capacity focus on strengthening these attributes to create resilient, self-sustaining populations capable of influencing their social environments positively. Empowerment theory underscores increasing people’s control over decisions and resources affecting their lives.(12) It involves enhancing knowledge, skills, confidence, and agency while transforming unequal power relations between service providers and communities. Empowerment is both a process and outcome, where engagement fosters co-learning, critical consciousness, and action aimed at structural changes promoting equity.

Participation frameworks emphasise the importance of engaging communities at multiple levels, from consultation to decision-making and ownership of initiatives. Meaningful participation ensures that interventions are relevant, culturally appropriate, and supported by community members. It enables diverse groups, especially marginalized populations, to influence the agenda and outcomes of social services, enhancing legitimacy and effectiveness. Health Equity Frameworks, often embedded in community engagement, emphasize addressing systemic inequities in social determinants of health and service access. These frameworks call for redistributing resources and power within communities to reduce disparities and promote fairness in social service benefits.(13) Evaluation criteria based on equity ensure that engagement processes do not merely include communities symbolically but result in tangible improvements in social conditions and opportunities for vulnerable groups.

An integrative framework combining these elements was proposed by, describing their relationship using the acronym CHOICE: Capacity building, Human rights, Organizational sustainability, Institutional accountability, Contribution, and Enabling environment. This framework conceptualizes empowerment as a pathway to health equity, where building community capacity and participation leads to equitable outcomes and sustainable development.(14) Community-based participatory research (CBPR) is an example that operationalizes these constructs by emphasizing shared leadership, equitable communication, and mutual respect in partnership processes to advance social justice and health equity.

These frameworks guide community engagement by aligning strategies to foster meaningful community involvement, challenge inequities, and build sustainable social service systems that reflect community realities and priorities.

4. Levels of Community Engagement

Community engagement in social services operates across various levels, each representing increasing degrees of community involvement and ownership over programs, projects, or services. These levels reflect the depth of participation by communities—from being recipients or consultees to becoming decision-makers and leaders in their own development. Four key models are commonly discussed: community-oriented, community-based, community-managed, and community-owned.

Understanding these models helps practitioners tailor engagement approaches to foster meaningful and sustainable community impact.

4.1. Community-Oriented Model

The community-oriented model is often the foundational or most basic level of engagement where the primary focus is on designing social services with the community's interests in mind but with limited actual community control. In this model, social service providers take the lead in planning and delivering services, though they strive to understand and respond to community needs through surveys, consultations, or public dialogues. This model is characterized by one-way or limited two-way communication, where information flows mostly from providers to the community, and the latter's involvement is primarily as recipients or informants. The intent is to improve service relevance and utilization by integrating community perspectives, but decision-making power largely remains with the institutions or organizations.(15) The community-oriented approach is valuable for raising awareness, outreach, and gathering input to refine services. (Figure 1) It may fall short in empowering communities or building local capacity for self-directed action. It represents a starting point for engagement, often used when resources, expertise, or institutional frameworks limit deeper community involvement.

4.2. Community-Based Model

At the next level, the community-based model involves direct participation and partnership with community members and organizations throughout the social service process. Services and initiatives are designed and implemented in collaboration with local groups, often leveraging existing community structures such as neighborhood associations, faith-based groups, or grassroots organizations. In this model, communities are not just informants but active collaborators and contributors. They help set priorities, co-create interventions, and provide ongoing feedback. This shared responsibility enhances trust and ensures that services are more culturally relevant, responsive, and accessible.(16) Community-based engagement typically includes mechanisms like advisory committees, participatory action research, volunteer involvement, and community-led outreach efforts. While organizations retain overall managerial responsibility, accountability systems evolve to incorporate community input, making social services more transparent and inclusive. This model

increases social capital, builds local skills and leadership, and often leads to more sustainable outcomes than community-oriented approaches alone. It also serves as an important bridge for fostering deeper ownership and empowerment among marginalized groups.

4.3. Community-Managed Model

The community-managed model takes engagement a step further by transferring substantial managerial authority and control over social services to community groups or organizations. In this model, communities actively manage planning, budgeting, implementation, and evaluation processes. They may administer service delivery through locally governed committees or community-based organizations (CBOs) with autonomy over resource allocation and operational decisions. Community management fosters a higher level of empowerment and accountability, as communities become responsible for the sustainability and quality of services. This approach often involves capacity-building initiatives to develop governance structures, fiscal management skills, and technical expertise within the community. Community-managed models are common in contexts of decentralization and participatory governance reforms.(17) They are particularly effective in ensuring that services reflect local priorities, build social cohesion, and stimulate grassroots leadership. The success of this model hinges on adequate support from external agencies and clear frameworks for shared responsibility to avoid isolation or resource constraints. Examples range from community-run health clinics to educational programs managed by parent-teacher associations, exemplifying practical community self-determination in social service delivery.

4.4. Community-Owned Model

At the highest level, the community-owned model embodies full ownership of social services by the community. Here, the community owns,

governs, and sustains the services with minimal external control or influence. This model reflects the ideals of self-determination and empowerment, where communities are central actors in all aspects of the social service continuum. Community ownership involves long-term commitment and resources mobilized from within the community, governance mechanisms that ensure democratic participation, and structures that allow evolving community needs to shape service evolution. This model prioritizes equity and cultural relevance, drawing on the community's collective identity, values, and assets as foundational strengths. Community-owned models often emerge from sustained community mobilization, organizing, and capacity-building efforts. They have been associated with enhanced resilience, innovation, and systemic change as communities take charge of addressing root causes of social challenges.(18) While aspirational, community ownership requires significant capacity, infrastructure, and supportive policies to thrive. Successful examples include indigenous-led social programs, cooperatives managing housing or welfare services, and grassroots organizations that have scaled community resources to sustain independent service provision.

These four levels of community engagement represent a continuum from provider-driven to community-led models. Moving along this continuum increases community decision-making power, ownership, and responsibility, which in turn fosters greater empowerment, equity, and sustainability in social service delivery. Implementing and transitioning between these levels depends on social, cultural, political, and resource contexts, demanding adaptable strategies that respect community readiness and aspirations. The levels of community engagement is mentioned in

Figure-1.

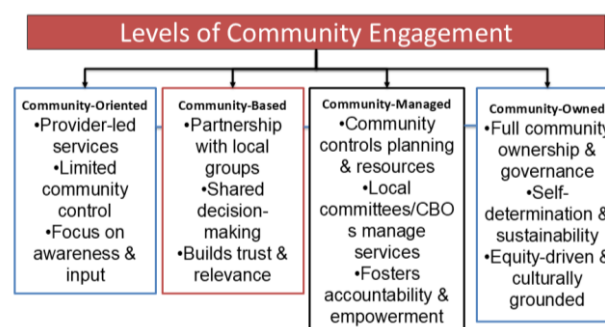


Figure 1: Levels of Community Engagement.

5. Core Strategies for Engagement

Effective community engagement in social services relies on a variety of core strategies designed to involve communities meaningfully across all stages of program development and implementation. These strategies foster dialogue, collaboration, education, data gathering, and utilization of modern communication tools to build trust, empower community voices, and co-create locally relevant solutions.

5.1.Public Dialogue and Consultation: Town Halls, Surveys, Questionnaires

Public dialogue and consultation are foundational engagement strategies that create open channels for community members to express their views, provide feedback, and participate in decision-making processes. Town hall meetings, for example, convene diverse community members in a public forum where they can interact directly with social service providers, policymakers, and other stakeholders. These meetings foster transparency and inclusive discussion, enabling collective identification of priorities and concerns. Surveys and questionnaires complement public forums by enabling collection of structured data from broader populations.(19) They capture quantitative and qualitative information about community needs, preferences, and satisfaction with services. Online and paper-based questionnaires allow engagement of hard-to-reach or less vocal groups by providing anonymous, convenient means to share opinions. Together, these tools support an evidence-based approach to social service planning and refinement while ensuring community voices are documented and valued.

5.2.Collaborative Partnerships and Co-Creation: Participatory Planning, Community Advisory Boards

Collaborative partnerships emphasize shared power, responsibility, and innovation in addressing social challenges. Participatory planning involves community members working alongside social service providers from the earliest stages, jointly identifying issues, designing interventions, and making key decisions. This approach ensures programs are grounded in community realities and increases local ownership and legitimacy.

Community advisory boards (CABs) institutionalize collaboration by bringing together representatives from diverse community sectors to guide program development, implementation, and evaluation. Advisory boards foster ongoing dialogue, hold

organizations accountable, and advocate for community interests. Co-creation processes may extend to resource allocation, priority-setting, and monitoring outcomes, promoting equitable partnerships and a sense of collective purpose.(20) Such collaboration enhances trust and builds social capital, strengthening community capacity and resilience. It shifts the dynamic from service delivery to community empowerment and sustainability.

5.3.Education and Outreach: Workshops, Training, Informational Campaigns

Education and outreach strategies aim to increase community awareness, knowledge, and skills relevant to social and health issues. Workshops and training sessions provide interactive environments for learning, dialogue, and capacity building. They equip community members, leaders, and service providers with tools for informed decision-making, advocacy, and leadership. Informational campaigns raise public awareness about critical issues, available services, rights, and opportunities, leveraging media, printed materials, and community gatherings(21). These campaigns often integrate culturally tailored messaging to reach diverse groups effectively. Outreach efforts also engage marginalized populations by overcoming barriers such as language, literacy, or mistrust. Through education and outreach, communities enhance their collective efficacy and ability to participate actively and confidently in social service processes.

5.4.Digital and Online Engagement: Social Media, Online Forums, Virtual Meetings

The rise of digital technologies expands the reach and inclusiveness of community engagement strategies. Social media platforms provide dynamic spaces for information sharing, community mobilization, advocacy, and dialogue across broad and diverse audiences. Online forums facilitate sustained discussions and collaboration beyond physical geographic constraints.(22) Virtual meetings enable participation from individuals who might otherwise face access barriers due to mobility, time, or location constraints.(23) They support inclusive engagement by providing flexible, multimodal avenues for involvement. Digital engagement also helps capture real-time feedback and extend the lifespan of community conversations. While technology augments engagement, challenges around digital literacy, access disparities, and confidentiality must be addressed to ensure equitable participation and trust.

5.5. Research and Data Collection: Participatory Action Research, Focus Groups

Participatory action research (PAR) involves communities as active researchers, collaboratively identifying research questions, collecting data, analyzing findings, and applying results to drive social change. This approach democratizes knowledge production and ensures research is relevant, ethical, and empowering. Focus groups provide qualitative insights through facilitated group discussions that explore community perceptions, experiences, and attitudes. (24) They are valuable for understanding complex social dynamics, testing ideas, and gathering detailed feedback. Both methods foster deeper community ownership of data and evidence, inform intervention design, and build local research capacity. They also strengthen trust between researchers and communities by emphasizing transparency and reciprocity.

6 .Best Practices and Success Factors in Community Engagement

Community engagement in social services is most effective when it is thoughtfully tailored, inclusive, and sustained. Recognizing the complexities of diverse communities and building genuine

partnerships based on trust and empowerment are essential. Here are key best practices and success factors that underpin meaningful and impactful community engagement:

6.1.Context-Specific Adaptation

Effective engagement requires a nuanced understanding of the local context—social, cultural, economic, and political factors that shape communities and their needs. There is no “one-size-fits-all” strategy. Approaches must be flexible and responsive to the unique attributes and histories of each community. Context-specific adaptation means listening carefully to local voices, acknowledging community values and traditions, and adapting language, methods, and timing accordingly. (25) It also necessitates recognizing local power dynamics and existing resources or obstacles that influence engagement potential. Tailored approaches mitigate risks of cultural insensitivity, exclusion, or ineffective communication and enhance relevance and responsiveness. Participatory planning processes that co-design programs with community members themselves promote this adaptability and ownership. The list of Various best practices with their key actions are listed below in **Table-1**.

Table-1- Various best practices with their key actions.

Best Practice / Success Factor	Description	Key Actions / Elements
Context-Specific Adaptation	Engagement approaches must be tailored to the local social, cultural, economic, and political context.	Listen to local voices; respect community traditions; adapt language, methods, and timing; recognize local power dynamics and resources; co-design programs with the community.
Building Trust and Credibility	Trust is fundamental for ongoing participation and partnership.	Demonstrate transparency, reliability, and respect; honor commitments; provide timely feedback; engage trusted local leaders; create safe, welcoming spaces for dialogue.
Sustained Collaboration and Co-Learning	Engagement is a continuous process involving mutual learning and relationship building.	Facilitate bidirectional knowledge exchange; build shared understanding and language; use long-term mechanisms like advisory boards; foster adaptive, resilient program management.
Empowering Marginalized Groups	Empowerment ensures vulnerable and excluded communities meaningfully participate and influence decisions.	Tailor outreach and facilitation to overcome participation barriers; provide accessible meeting formats; support leadership development among marginalized populations; promote diversity in representation and equity in outcomes.

6.2. Empowering Marginalized Groups

Inclusive engagement prioritizes the meaningful participation of marginalized, vulnerable, and historically excluded groups. Empowerment involves creating conditions where these groups can exercise agency, influence decisions, and benefit equitably from social services. Tailored outreach, culturally sensitive facilitation, accessible meeting formats, and targeted capacity-building are critical for overcoming barriers to participation. Supporting leadership development within marginalized populations helps shift power imbalances and promotes diversity in representation. Empowering marginalized groups enriches community engagement by bringing diverse perspectives that lead to more just and effective services. It also advances social equity by addressing systemic exclusion directly rather than perpetuating it inadvertently.

7. Future Directions

Community engagement is a multifaceted and dynamic process essential to improving the effectiveness, equity, and sustainability of social services. At its core, community engagement is about fostering meaningful partnerships and active participation between social service providers and the diverse communities they serve. This inclusive approach recognizes the importance of local knowledge, cultural values, and lived experiences in shaping interventions that truly meet community needs and priorities. Effective community engagement goes beyond token consultation to build trust, shared ownership, and collaborative decision-making aimed at empowering communities and enhancing social well-being. The theoretical foundations of community engagement are grounded in models that contrast needs-based versus strengths-based approaches.(26) The needs-based model focuses on addressing deficits and remedial support, often driven by external experts, whereas the strengths-based model emphasizes leveraging existing community assets, capabilities, and social networks to foster empowerment and resilience. These approaches influence the strategies deployed, from public dialogue and consultation to collaborative partnerships and co-creation. Consensus-building and conflict engagement strategies further define how communities and institutions interact—either through collaborative, trust-building dialogue or through advocacy and challenge to power structures. Community engagement frameworks also highlight critical constructs such as community capacity building,

empowerment, meaningful participation, and health equity, all of which underscore the transformative potential of authentic engagement.

Community engagement can be understood along a continuum of levels ranging from community-oriented to community-owned models. The community-oriented model involves limited community input primarily as service recipients, whereas community-based models foster active partnerships and co-creation. At higher levels, community-managed models shift substantial management and decision-making authority to local groups, while community-owned approaches represent full ownership and governance by the community itself. The progression across these levels increases community decision-making power and responsibility, fostering greater sustainability and equity in social service delivery. Successful engagement relies on core strategies adapted to context and community preferences(27). Public dialogue, including town halls and surveys, enables community input and transparency. Collaborative partnerships and advisory boards foster shared leadership and continuous feedback. Education and outreach empower communities with knowledge and skills, while digital and online tools extend engagement to wider, often marginalized populations. Participatory research methods such as action research and focus groups promote co-learning and data-driven decision-making, further reinforcing community ownership of interventions. Despite its strengths, community engagement faces significant barriers and challenges, including resource limitations, cultural and linguistic diversity, entrenched power dynamics, trust deficits, and the digital divide. Resource constraints limit the scope and sustainability of outreach and facilitation efforts, while cultural and linguistic barriers require culturally humble and responsive approaches to ensure inclusivity.(28) Power imbalances both between institutions and communities, and within communities themselves, hinder equitable participation and require deliberate strategies for trust-building and empowerment. Meanwhile, digital engagement, though promising, risks excluding those without access or digital literacy if not complemented by traditional methods.

8. Conclusion

Community engagement emerges as a cornerstone for enhancing general social services, moving beyond consultation toward meaningful partnerships and shared ownership. By integrating

community knowledge, strengths, and lived experiences, engagement strategies ensure that services are culturally appropriate, relevant, and equitable. The shift from community-oriented to community-owned models illustrates a trajectory toward empowerment, resilience, and sustainability. While challenges such as resource constraints, power imbalances, and digital divides persist, adopting adaptable, inclusive, and context-sensitive strategies can overcome these barriers. Embedding authentic community engagement within social service frameworks not only improves outcomes but also strengthens trust, accountability, and long-term social cohesion.

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