

WEBQUEST [ADVANCED LEVEL]– Involving local communities

<b>THEME ALLOCATED:</b>	Involving local communities
<b>PARTNER ORGANISATION:</b>	MROT
<b>TITLE OF THE WEBQUEST:</b>	<b>Community Online Engagement Plan</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION:</b>	
<p>Tourism involves a wide range of stakeholders - local residents, tourism and non-tourism businesses, farmers, public authorities, NGOs, and tourists – who are important players in a destination's success or sustainability. Planning and managing sustainable tourism should always involve finding ways to engage stakeholders in ongoing communication, and appropriate participation formats to prevent and manage potential conflicts.</p> <p>Involvement of local community has substantial value in tourism for locals, for the destination managers and for tourists. The community's local culture and traditions, together with the natural environment, define what the destination is made of and why tourists come over to visit. Without the community, destinations lose their unique character and authenticity – destinations lose their 'souls'.</p> <p>Thus, the needs and aspirations of locals must be maintained, meaning that they need to be heard, listened to, addressed and evaluated, on a regular basis. One of the ways of mitigating the negative tourism impacts, to empower the local people, and to avoid or mitigate conflicts, is involving communities through genuine, planned and regular community consultations.</p> <p>There are ways to engage face-to-face, such as focus groups, roundtable discussions, small group workshops, or multi-stakeholders meetings. However, technology has changed the way we engage with local communities, whether it is in tourism or any other sector. Additionally, due to many constraints that prevent people from attending in person – such as time, cost, mobility, geography, health, childcare – online consultations have become much more popular, particularly during the Covid19 pandemic. Online consultations remove these barriers, allow participants to contribute in their own time, and provide an opportunity for a large number of people to comment on an issue, engaging the local community on a much wider scale.</p>	
<b>TASKS</b>	
<p>You have a new project you want to implement in your tourism destination and you plan to involve the local community through consultation. In WebQuest: Community Consultation [Basic Level], you have done some initial research on why the consultation is important and what the challenges you may come across. You are still convinced that the project will benefit the local community. You have decided to conduct the online engagement to reach as many participants as possible.</p> <p>Your task, therefore, is to write an Online Engagement Plan: what will you have to think about while planning? What do you need to be aware of? How would you encourage people to participate? How will you communicate? You will have to bear in mind that you may have to do a series of consultations with various groups and over the lifecycle of the project.</p> <p>In this WebQuest, you are going to be guided through a series of tasks that will help you to write your Plan. By conducting online consultations, you will have removed many barriers that could potentially prevent many people from voicing their views. You will also be in a</p>	

better position to respond to their needs, get the support, overcome potential barriers for your project and mitigate potential conflict.

Let's get started!

## **PROCESS**

### **Step 1: Research to know the community context**

Whether you are planning a face-to-face or online engagement, before you talk to anyone in the community you will need to prepare by doing a community research to understand your community. You will need to understand the historic, demographic, socio-economic, cultural and environmental community context and the community needs. Click this link to see what questions you can ask to help determine the characteristics of your community and work out where your interests intersect with their needs:

- [Understanding the Community Context and who can help with the data](#) (scroll down to 'understanding the community context')
- [Understanding and describing community](#)

Watch this short video on the importance of knowing your community to inspire participation: [Inspiring community participation](#)

### **Step 2: Setting consultation goals**

You will also have to take some time to think about your purpose and audience. What do you want to achieve with this consultation and who you would like to be involved. Desired goals can range from informing and educating to gathering input, seeking discussion and direction and encouraging ongoing involvement. The goals can also change throughout the lifespan of your project. It is important to understand what you want to achieve in the particular stage or at a particular time.

- [What to consider while planning online consultations](#)

Just as importantly, you will need to give careful thought to the best methods to engage the diversity of individuals and groups in the community with whom you will need to consult. For example, your approach to consulting with parents of young children will likely be different from your approach to consulting with youth. Make sure that you use the evidence from your contextual research to inform your approach to community consultation.

### **Step 3: Benefits of online consultations**

As mentioned earlier, online consultation can provide an opportunity for a large number of people to comment on an issue. But is not just about letting people have access to a process, but also about making that process open and honest leaving little room for spin. Some argue that online is the future of community consultation: ["Online" is the future of community consultation](#).

Here are some benefits of online community engagement:

- [Six major benefits of online community engagement](#)
- [The benefits to using social media to engage residents](#)

You may want to read some interesting examples of how planners have use online engagement to build community understanding and participation. These strategies can be used by tourism managers too:

- [5 examples of planners using online engagement to build community understanding and participation.](#)

#### **Step 4: Tools for online community engagement**

There is no formula on what tools to pick for the online consultation. However, typically as the scope of the engagement increases, the tools become more complex and more interactive to support the process. It is also important to remember that many traditional forms of engagement, such as town hall meetings or workshops, can be replicated online. Watch this short video – starting from 3:40 to 6:30 – on a variety of online tools that can be used in community engagement, and how they change when the level of engagement increases:

- [Using digital technology for community engagement](#)

When choosing the right mix of tools for a consultation, the audience, the type of feedback needed, and analysis needs should all be considered. Click here for more information on forms of online consultations and commonly-used tools:

- [Different forms of online consultations](#) (scroll down to 'Common approaches')
- [Tools for a consultation](#)

Using social media is a powerful tool for destinations to engage with communities online. For example, twitter can be a powerful tool to make government processes more efficient and transparent, sharing emergency notices or updates on local events through brief announcements. This article provides a series of examples how different cities in the US use key social media platforms for engaging with residents, and informs about the risks associated with social media engagement:

- [Strategies for community engagement through social media platforms](#)

#### **Step 5: Communication for successful engagement**

In your final step of planning your online engagement, you need to think about communication throughout the whole process of engagement: to encourage them to participate, to provide updates on what is happening, and provide opportunities to have their say. You will also need to communicate the results of consultation process back to your community, with clear information about how you reached your decision or processed the consultation materials, and reasons for the direction you've ultimately chosen.

- [Seven ways to increase participation in online consultation](#)
- [How to reach your audience and keep them interested?](#) (p. 41-42)

You also need to ensure that everyone understands what is being communicated. Community engagement accessibility is an often overlooked — and essential — part of empowering community stakeholders to use their voices. Read some tips on how to improve your communication to make it accessible to your audience:

- [Community engagement accessibility checklist](#)

#### **EVALUATION**

It is now time to write down your online consultation plan that will include:

<b>Elements of the online engagement plan</b>	<b>Supporting questions</b>
A summary of the community context	What data and knowledge - historic, demographic, socio-economic, cultural and environmental – will be most useful for you to know for the successful consultation? How can you use this data to be more effective?
Consultation goals and audience	What is your main purpose of engagement? How much do you really want to engage? Will you have to engage with different member of the community during different stages of the consultation? Are there any groups in the community that will be excluded from the consultation, and what can you do to mitigate it? ~ What impact will particular members have on the success of the consultation?
Benefits specific to my project and to my community	Is online consultation really enough, or it worth considering face-to-face methods too?
Consultation tools	Which tools will be most effective, and when? What do you need to be conscious of while using social media in my consultation?
Communications and feedback	How would you encourage people to participate? Are your messages reaching everyone equally? Is your language clear enough? Are your images easy to read? Does your communication include sharing information only or will you also provide feedback on the results for the decisions taken?

Test your knowledge with the multiple-choice quiz below:

- The benefits of online consultations are:
  - Allow participants to contribute in their own time
  - They are useful where it is difficult or inappropriate to bring your intended participants together physically
  - Help overcome several barriers of engagement
  - All of the above

2. True or False:

You will need to understand the historic, demographic, socio-economic, cultural and environmental community context and the community needs only when doing the face-to-face consultations. **False**

3. What are the risks associated with using social media in community engagement?

- Misinformation
- Prejudice
- Loss of nuance
- **All of the above**

4. Which of these statements is NOT true:

- Communicating about the consultation process make the residents feel involved, valued and included.
- **Using technical and sophisticated vocabulary increases the success of the discussed project, even if not many residents understand it**
- It is crucial to communicate with your community throughout the whole process of engagement.
- None of the above.

5. True or false: 'Typically as the scope of the engagement increases, the tools become more complex and more interactive'. **True**

## **CONCLUSION**

Congratulations! You have completed the tasks that have given you a good overview of what to consider when planning online community engagement. This knowledge will be particularly useful to put into practice when the traditional face to face engagement is limited or not possible at all.

There is general agreement in the tourism literature that hosts should have a full participatory role in every stage of development of a tourism proposal. Tourism development along with the involvement of local community will result in sustainable development as well as benefit economic, environmental and cultural benefits. Active participation of community in tourism ensures the enrichment of tourism experience as well, as experiencing their culture is one of the key attractions of the destination.

COVID-19 has forced destinations to drastically change how they work, assemble for meetings, and engage with community members on a regular basis. The online engagement have already proven to be effective in reaching many more community members than the traditional methods, and embracing this will help tourism in destinations to be more sustainable.