

GETTING COMMUNITIES INVOLVED BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER FIRES

IT IS VERY IMPORTANT THAT THE COMMUNITY IS INVOLVED WHENEVER TRYING TO IMPROVE FIRE SAFETY FOR INFORMAL SETTLEMENTS OR BACKYARD DWELLINGS



To access fire safety training material: videos and brochures (bit.ly/3ENVYUn) and guide book (<http://hdl.handle.net/10019.1/108926>)

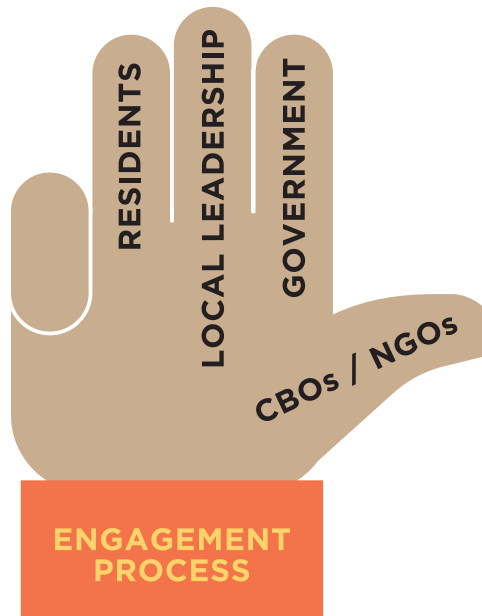


GETTING COMMUNITIES INVOLVED

Even the world's fastest fire truck, with its crew ready to go and located a few kilometres away from a backyard dwelling or informal settlement, will not get to an incident fast enough to save the people in the home where a fire starts. The local community will always play a key role in all aspects of fire safety.



PRINCIPLES OF COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT



Many different stakeholders should be involved in any kind of community engagement processes. It is useful to think of these stakeholders as fingers on a hand, as shown here – they are linked, and all are essential if the hand is to function effectively. They include:

- Local residents.
- Local leaders (from officially elected Ward Councillors to more informally appointed grassroots leaders).
- Government departments (especially the fire department).
- Community-based organisations (CBOs), NGOs and faith-based organisations.
- Also consider involving any other organisations already working in a particular community.



THE COLLABORATIVE PROCESS

There are several important steps in engaging communities about fire safety.

SCOPING

Before engaging with any community, it is essential to undertake some basic background research, referred to as 'scoping'.

INVOLVING LOCAL LEADERS AND GAINING ACCESS

Participatory processes are slow, take time to set up and cannot be rushed. Outsiders to the community should always start by negotiating access and build a relationship of trust.

ADOPTING A HOLISTIC APPROACH

Any intervention should address the social, physical and economic development needs of residents.

MONITORING OUTCOMES

Tracking project outcomes is critical for recording the successes achieved and identifying the shortcomings. Stay involved with the community over the longer term.



TIPS FOR ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

BE CAREFUL WHEN IDENTIFYING AND ENGAGING COMMUNITY MEMBERS

Identifying the right mix of community stakeholders is critically important.

ANTICIPATE SOCIAL TENSION AND THE POSSIBILITY OF CONFLICT

Real participation and change can increase the likelihood of confrontation and conflict, between the powerful and less powerful and between different groups.

BEING A SUPPORTIVE FACILITATOR - NOT AN 'EXPERT'

Effective community engagement requires a shift from teaching to learning. People have a very good understanding of the issues they face and ideas for how to address them.



CHALLENGES WHEN ADDRESSING FIRE SAFETY

- Communities constantly change with people leaving and arriving.
- Populations are growing fast.
- A community consists of many groups of people. Culture, language, gender differences and dominant voices can lead to division.
- Home "ownership" may be complex. People may rent out informal and backyard dwellings, meaning that landlords may have significant power.



UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY NEEDS

Below are some of the needs and challenges faced by community members on a daily basis:

- 1 Security and crime.
- 2 Employment and food security.
- 3 Schooling and childcare.
- 4 Health and sanitation.
- 5 Flooding and other natural disasters.
- 6 Electricity supply.
- 7 Fires (as a priority this will move up and down a list, often depending on how many fires an area has experienced).

A fire safety device, such as a smoke alarm costing R150, may not be desired by a family struggling to feed children and are regularly experiencing crime. Hence, holistic interventions are needed. Holistic fire safety may also mean working with other organisations such as social workers, health professionals, faith-based organisations and CBOs.

Through these organisations it may be possible to identify high risk homes or areas which can be prioritised in terms of fire safety interventions.



COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT

The following are specific activities that dwellers can undertake before, during and after an incident. At no point should residents undertake activities which would endanger themselves. Fires can move very fast and be unpredictable.

A. COMMUNITY PREPAREDNESS (BEFORE)

- Train community members about fire safety (e.g. putting fires out, electrical safety, cooking safety, the fire department number, evacuation, preparedness etc.).
- Develop a community preparedness plan.
- Have a family emergency plan prepared.
- Clear combustible items next to homes away from them.
- Have more than one way of escaping from a home (e.g. a weakened panel).
- Have a “grab bag” with documents, medicines and valuables in case of emergency.
- Have a printout/laminated page and other items (e.g. keyrings) with emergency numbers.
- Map evacuation pathways and identify assembly points.

B. WHEN A FIRE HAS STARTED (DURING)

- Notify other residents.
- Alert the fire department. Provide directions/landmarks.
- If safe, carry out basic firefighting activities using bucket brigades, thick blankets or by collapsing dwellings.
- Put on the most protective clothing owned (e.g. leather, overalls, thick cotton). Avoid synthetic materials (e.g. nylon).
- Evacuate. Do not come back for possessions.
- Clear access routes to allow fire truck access.
- Guide the fire department to the fire site.
- Notify firefighters if flare-ups occur.
- Protect firefighters and municipal agencies.
- If possible, try to see which direction the fire is moving in.
- Keep fire hydrants clear. Help firefighters in locating them.
- Assist other community members.
- Obey any instructions from firefighters, police or municipal officials.

C. PREPARING YOUR HOME (DURING)

- Evacuate immediately if the fire is close. Only carry out the activities below if safe.
- Close all doors and windows.
- Put curtains, combustible wall linings and furniture into the middle of a room such that they cannot be ignited as easily.
- Turn off the electricity and gas supplies.
- If possible, remove gas cylinders and paraffin bottles.
- Make sure your “grab bag” is ready.
- Clear any combustible items next to homes away.

D. RECOVERY (AFTER)

- Assist injured people.
- Make recovery arrangements (e.g. temporary shelter).
- Work with municipal departments, Disaster Risk Management, organisations and NGOs providing relief.
- If possible, do not start rebuilding immediately.
- If possible, try to rebuild homes in a more ordered way, with better road and pathway access.
- Community leaders should assist with counting the number of affected homes and people.



REBLOCKING

Reblocking provides an improved community layout, allowing for better access, evacuation and firefighting activities. However, various challenges exist with this process that need to be addressed. The process is slow and involves numerous stakeholders. The process can be expensive and/or may lack community support. Also, reblocking requires ongoing monitoring to prevent inhabitants from extending their homes into newly created pathways and open areas.

Reblocking immediately after a fire is typically not practical. Inhabitants who have lost their homes will be desperate to rebuild so are unlikely to wait for the planning of a new layout to take place.

