

# COMMUNITY CONSULTATION DURING CONSTRUCTION: ATTITUDES, EXPERIENCES AND SKILLS

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Community consultation is traditionally the domain of urban and town planners. But it is often the case that residual community concerns linger into construction phases as the true impact of construction on the community becomes physically apparent. However, too often community concerns are ignored or badly managed, leading to damaging and often costly disputes which harm communities, the firms involved and the industry as a whole. To better understand the reasons for these practices, theories of community consultation are used to explore the attitudes, experiences and skills of professionals working with the construction phase of projects in consulting the communities in which they build. One hundred and fifty construction professionals involved during construction were surveyed and ten were interviewed. The results indicate that the majority of the construction professionals find the practice of dealing with the community during construction a hindrance and that the process is considered an inconvenient, time-consuming and costly exercise. Very few project managers have any expertise in this area and there is an assumption that community consultation is the responsibility of town planners before work starts on site and that further interaction with the community is not needed.

Keywords: community, consultation, risk, skills, project management, construction, education

## INTRODUCTION

There is accumulating evidence over the last decade that Beck's (1992) prediction of an increasingly paranoid society was prophetic. Communities appear to be far more educated and informed about the risks that government and business represent to their lives and increasingly willing to protest if they perceive it to be against their interests. The construction sector arguably has a greater impact on the lives of people than any other industry sector. Unlike most industries, its products are procured in the heart of the communities in which they will remain imbedded for decades and even hundreds of years, influencing the social, cultural, economic and ecological environment in which people live, work and play. It is therefore ironic that research into community consultation during the construction stage of projects is very much in its infancy. Apart from the research of Preece et al (1998), Moodley (1999), Glass and Simmonds' (2007), Teo's (2008) and Chinyio and Olomolaiye's (2010) empirical work in this area is rare. And the research that does exist points to an industry that is ill-equipped to manage community concerns. The consequences of this inadequacy can be extremely costly, leading to acrimonious and costly disputes which disrupt the progress of projects, force late changes to designs and construction methods and

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tarnish the reputation of those involved. It is within this context that the aim of this paper is to explore the attitudes, experiences and skills of professionals working with the construction phase of projects in consulting the communities in which they build. The importance of this work has been recognised by Winch et al. (2007) who argue that public involvement needs to be seen as a vehicle to increase project success and not a hurdle that needs to be overcome to reach project completion.

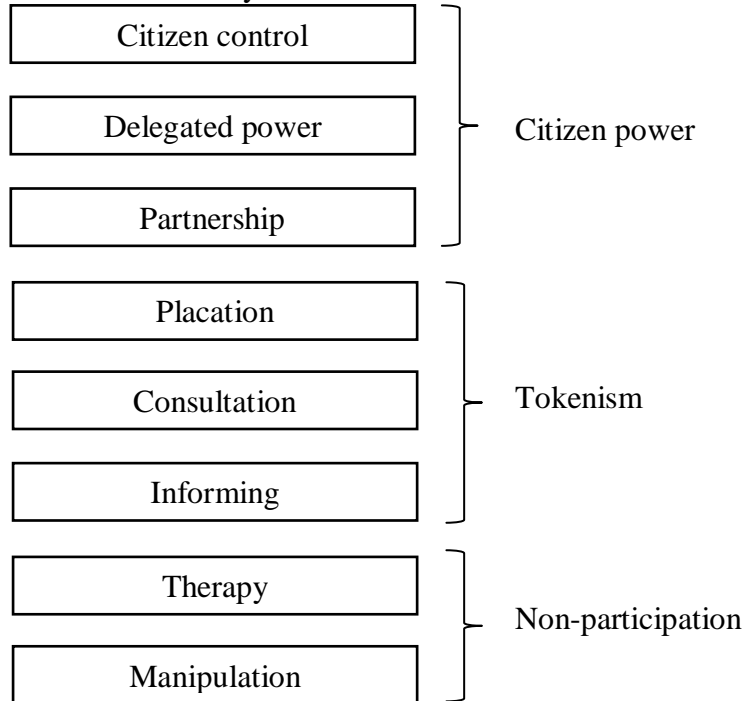
## **THE COMMUNITY CONSULTATION PROCESS**

The term community usually refers to a social unit that shares common values and interests and normally lives in close proximity to each other (Barzilai, 2003). Holst (2002) describes community consultation as an 'opportunity' to engage with communities to produce a better mutual outcome using a structured and principled negotiation process. In theory, the purpose of community consultation is to listen to the community about their concerns and aspirations, seek feedback from the community about proposed plans and, inform the community about decisions that are in tune with their best interests. Typically this involves attendance at community events like markets and festivals, dedicated community forums and public meetings, surveys, focus groups and workshops, steering and advisory committees, community exhibitions, newspaper articles and advertisements and the use of models and displays (virtual and physical) (Troast 2011). The appropriate level and type of consultation will depend on a range of factors such as the size, complexity and location of the project, the time and resources available, the skills of the proponents and the knowledge and skills of the community to understand the issues at hand. Normally a combination of the above methods will be used.

Regardless of who undertakes the process, community consultation should seek to reach out to as many community stakeholders as possible. Numerous models have been advanced to conceptualise this process. For example, Arnstein (1969) developed 'a ladder of citizen participation' beginning with full non participation and leading to full citizen power (Figure 1). Despite its age, this model is used extensively in practice. In recent times the use of this ladder has been predominantly in community action programs where communities and towns are chosen for government infrastructure projects. The model in short can be broken into three levels of citizen participation: non-participation; tokenism and; citizen power. These are defined by different approaches to consultation. On the bottom rungs of the eight step ladder are manipulation and therapy which are aimed more at educating or 'curing' stakeholder concerns rather than involving them in the project. The next levels on the Arnstein ladder are informing, consultation and placation. These steps form the tokenism section of the ladder where the community is given the opportunity to put forward their points of view and have a voice in the process. However, the community lacks the authority to ensure their views will be acted upon by those in chairs of authority. Citizen power describes the upper echelons of the Arnstein ladder where partnerships, delegated power and citizen control provide communities with a real opportunity to provide input into decision-making processes.

Burby (2001) found that effective community consultation involves a number of key decisions relating to: objectives; timing; participants; techniques and; information provision. Many stakeholder consultations are ineffective because the objectives driving the process are not clearly formulated. Effective consultation also requires effective planning and dedicated time. Ad hoc meetings attached to the end of other meetings send the wrong message to stakeholders. It is also useful to employ a

stakeholder management strategy, which can disentangle the important stakeholders from those which are less important. The appropriate consultation technique also depends on the objectives of the process. And access to adequate and appropriate information is essential in order to empower stakeholders, to secure their involvement in the decision making process and ultimately, to ensure their acceptance of and commitment to any decisions made.



*Figure 1 Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation (Source: Arnstein, 1969)*

However, as Graham (2010) points out, while all this is good in theory, many communities claim consultation is a charade which disempowers traditionally disempowered members of the community. Graham presents evidence that on many occasions the intended social inclusion becomes an adversarial engagement leading to community protest and sometimes the mobilisation of extremist groups. Certainly, Teo's (2008) study of Australia's longest running community protest in Sydney supports this contention. Aboriginal groups felt they were being ignored in development process, the protest drew in groups from all around Australia and the local community vehemently and sometimes violently opposed the project. More recent research in the field of community psychology and consultation is seeking to explain this breakdown of relations between developers and communities using Actor-Network Theory (ANT). This work argues that present approaches and models of community consultation are inherently adversarial. ANT is being used as a mechanism to conceptualise how consultation might be used as an enrolment mechanism encouraging and promoting local politics during the early stages of construction projects.

## COMMUNITY CONSULTATION DURING CONSTRUCTION

In the construction industry, the process of community consultation occurs in different stages of a project. Traditionally, the majority of community consultation is completed during the planning and design phase when the developer lodges a development application. In theory, once all issues raised by the community have been satisfactorily resolved, the project proceeds to the construction stage. It is normally assumed that

once the project proceeds to this stage the community has less input into the project. However, as Teo and Loosemore (2010) point out, it is often the case that residual community concerns persist and when ignored, erupt into a fully blown protest against the development and the many firms associated with it.

Construction companies will often base their consultation process on a generic and typically rigid community consultation policy or more likely, an environmental management plan. Some projects may even have an individual community consultation plan, although this is rare. Most companies argue that the community consultation process is too in-depth to be managed by an individual Project Manager (Raidén et al 2006). Therefore, it is common for the process to be contracted out to a specialist consultant, as if it were similar to letting any other trade on the job. Cleland (2007) argues that this allows someone to focus on community relationships but as Winch et al (2007) argue, this can be a costly exercise and often portrays to the public a lack of care by the company which might appear to be outsourcing their responsibility to the community.

While many firms outsource their community liaison roles, this is not ideal. Furthermore, many small companies in the construction industry cannot afford the luxury of a community relations manager. Therefore, the management of the consultation process falls fully on the Project Manager and his team. For this reason, it is essential that Project Managers are equipped with the skills to successfully manage this process. Glass and Simmonds (2007) recognised this but also acknowledged that the key skills required to successfully undertake communication with the public are unclear and somewhat difficult to distinguish. These skills will also vary depending on the type of works, the length of the job and the size of the job.

Traditionally, the PMBOK Body of Knowledge (PMBOK 2012) is used as the worldwide guide of skills that are considered essential to completing a smooth project. The eight key skills include: time management; cost management; quality management; risk management; procurement management; communications management; integration management and; human resource management. Hartley (2003) identifies four major functions of the project manager: planning; organising; leading and; controlling. Oberlender (2000) sees the Project Manager as a leader and planner that has the ability to run a smooth transition of trades on a construction project as well as coordinate and organise when certain scope needs to be completed and finished. Oberlender (2000) argued that the most important role of the project manager is decision making and having the ability to make a decisive call in a short space of time. However, although there is extensive literature regarding the skills of a Project Manager there is little that identifies the skills required when it comes to managing the community consultation process (Glass and Simmonds 2007). As Glass and Simmonds (2007) pointed out, there is therefore a need for further research to identify the various skills required for successful community consultation whilst exploring the psychological relationship between the construction professionals and the community.

## **METHOD**

In analyzing and investigating this issue a random sample of 222 construction professionals in the UK, Australia and New Zealand were surveyed. Professionals were contacted through the membership networks of local Professional Institutions. Out of the 222 surveys distributed, 150 questionnaires were fully completed, producing a response rate of 68% and a sample structure shown in Table 1.

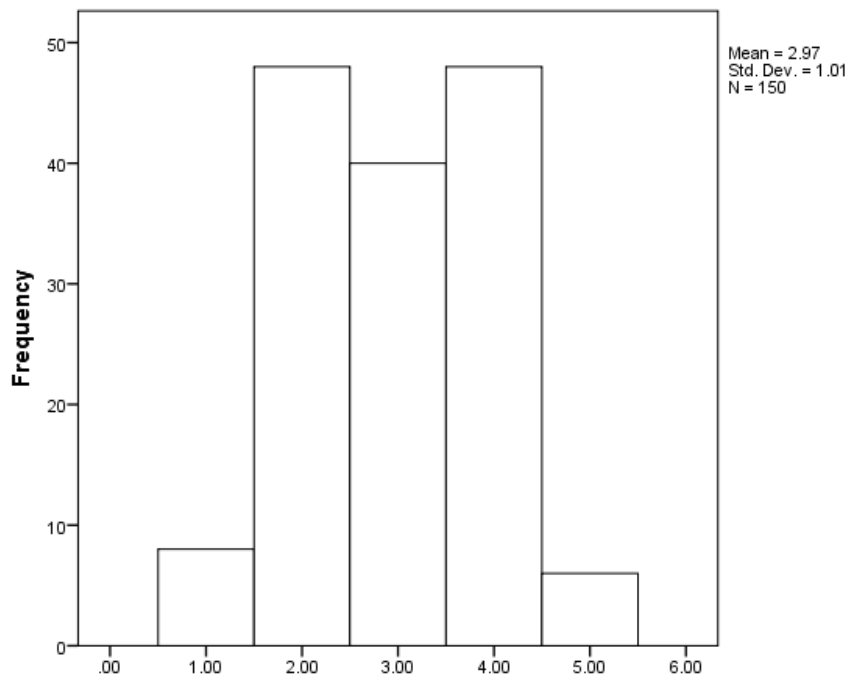
*Table 1 Sample structure*

| Respondent   | Respondent Number | %  |
|--|-------------------|----|
| Project Manager  | 54                | 37 |
| Site Manager   | 34                | 25 |
| Architect  | 23                | 23 |
| Other (directors, operations managers, sustainability managers, engineers) | 39                | 15 |
| Total  | 150               |    |

The questions and variables for the survey were designed to explore the community consultation experiences of the respondents, their attitudes towards community consultation and their skill base in being to do so effectively. Structured interviews were also undertaken with ten Australian project managers who volunteered during the survey to be interviewed. Logistics prevented managers in other countries being interviewed although our survey responses did not vary significantly between the countries sampled indicating that we could rely on Australian responses as representative. The purpose of the interviews was to explore in more detail respondent stories and experiences of community consultation and the underlying reasons for any major insights which emerged from the surveys. Like any sampling method, this process of self-selection has some limitations, most notably a possible tendency for certain ‘types’ of respondents to volunteer. However, in this case there were more volunteers than needed and to overcome this potential problem a second round of random sampling was undertaken by the research team.

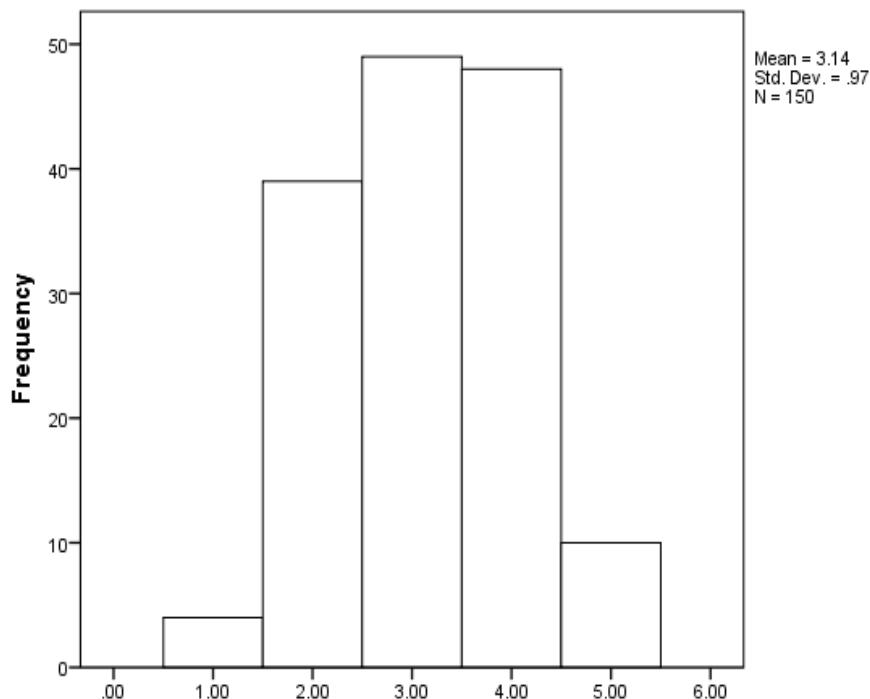
## DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

Figure 2 illustrates the level of influence that respondents believed the community had over projects during the construction period. In Figure 2, the standard deviation of 1.01 shows that 95% of the responses fall relatively close to the produced mean ( $M=2.97$ ) demonstrating that the community were thought to have “some influence” on construction professionals. A cross tabulation was also carried out for this question in relation to the roles of construction professionals and what each believed the influence was on construction. Interestingly, the results show that it is the site managers who bring the mean down and uniquely believe that communities have relatively little impact on their projects. However, site managers are also the group that has the largest experience of community interaction.



*Figure 2 Community influence on projects during the construction stage (1 being no influence 5 being large influence)*

Figure 3 illustrates how positive the community consultation experience had been for our respondents.

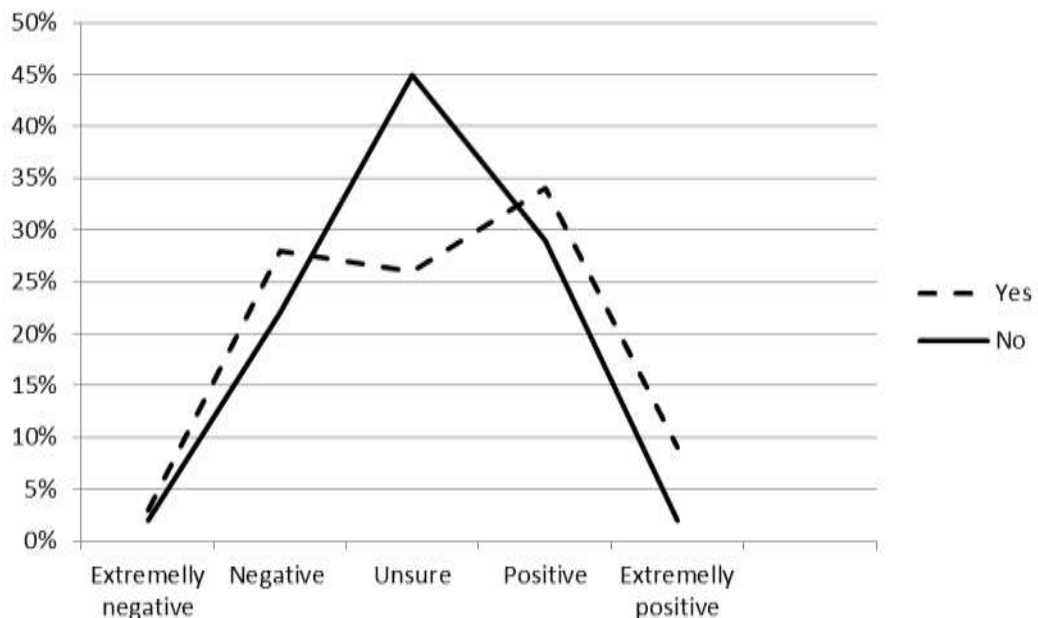


*Figure 3 Experiences in dealing with communities during construction (1 being extremely negative lowest and 5 being highest)*

Figure 3 shows that majority of respondents ( $M = 3.14$ ) had a marginally positive relationship with the community during construction. The standard deviation of .97 also shows that responses were quite similar and thus all tended to have a relationship with the community close to that of the mean. A cross tabulation showed quite distinct

differences in the experiences of the sample, with project managers and site managers having markedly worse experiences.

Figure 4 shows the relationship between those who ‘had’ and ‘had-not’ experienced protest and perception of community involvement. Interestingly, this shows that those respondents who had experienced protest had a more positive view of communities than those who had not experienced protest. In other words, negative community perceptions by construction professionals are in part born out of ignorance and preconceived ideas of how they behave. Interview data indicated that the majority of the respondents believed that community relationships depend crucially on the supply of information to, and the amount of contact with, the community. *“Keeping them in the loop keeps them a lot happier.”*.. *“Like any relationship it should improve the more contact there is.”* However, some respondents (a minority) believed that if the community is provided extended input into the project it may be detrimental to the project’s success. *“There is no point giving them a say if it’s going to be ill informed or if it’s a flippant comment rather than constructive feedback. .... I mean you give them an inch they take a mile sort of thing.”*



*Figure 4 Relationship between those who had encountered community protest and their attitudes towards the community.*

Figure 5 relates directly to the Arnstein (1969) model of community participation and shows that the majority of the respondents fell into the “tokenism” level of community participation.

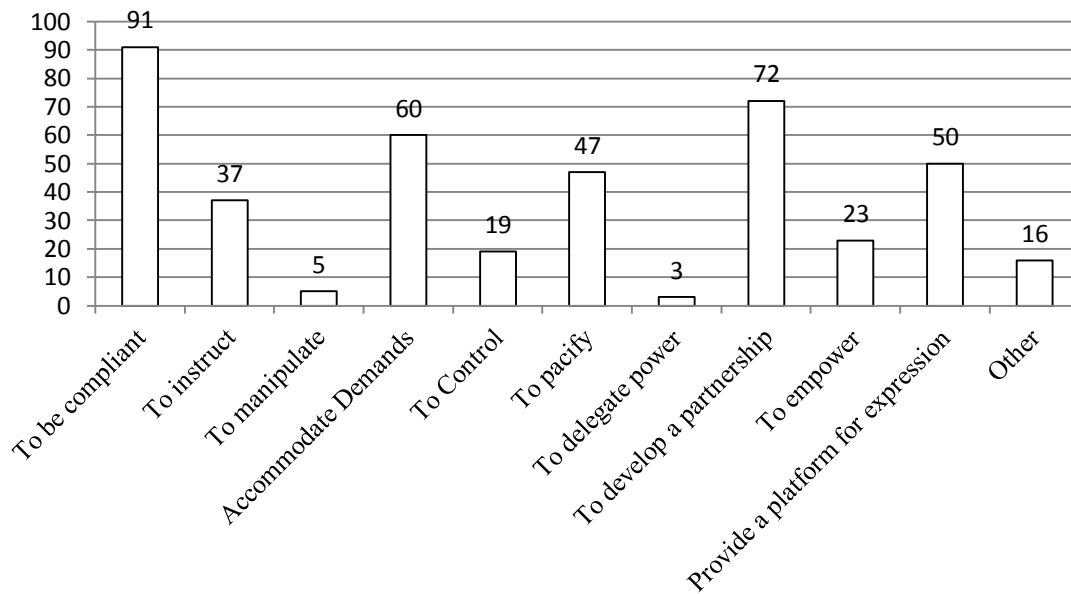


Figure 5 Reasons for consulting with the community

In explaining this, the interview data pointed to a widespread belief among respondents that the time and cost of community consultation was prohibitive. *“Due to time restraints...if the community was to be removed from the project all together, I mean construction professionals would find the task a lot easier as it’s one less stakeholder to deal with.”* ... *“We work big hours and the last thing we want to do is further our days by having to consult with the communities about our projects.”*

Most of the respondents also saw a separation of responsibility for project delivery and consultation. *“I think that the actual process should be left to the town planners only because it is their role during planning and there is no point passing these issues on to the project team if it’s just going to be more of a burden on the project team.”* ... *“I don’t see the point in having to change the professional required to undertake consultation between planning and construction when it is the planner’s job anyway”.*

In seeking to explain this, Figure 6 shows that most of the respondents had received no training in community consultation. Project and site managers were most strongly represented in the ‘no’ category, yet they were the roles most closely connected to the community. The interviews showed that many respondents saw formal training as unnecessary. *“I believe it’s because it’s relatively unnecessary to have formal training in community consultation. ... I reckon that general communication skills are all that is required to deal with the community.”* .. *“I can’t even imagine what they’d teach in formal community consultation training.”* Others pointed to the general lack of tertiary education in the construction industry. *“A lot of Project Managers come off the tools and I suppose come from different paths and just aren’t offered training.”* Finally, others argued that community consultation can only be learnt through experience on-the-job. *“I reckon I’ve gained 95% of my knowledge through on the job experiences and I think that’s the same with consultation.”*



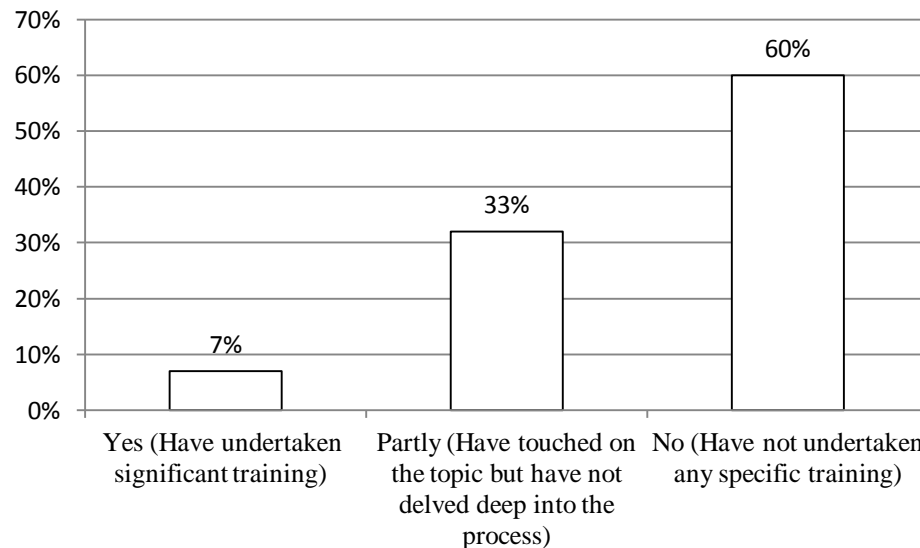


Figure 6 Have you been formally trained in community consultation?

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this paper was to explore the attitudes, experiences and skills of professionals working with the construction phase of projects in consulting the communities in which they build. Our results indicate that most construction professionals in our sample felt that they had a good relationship with the communities in which they built. Experience of community angst against projects was however very common, especially for ‘front-line’ managers who worked on site and interfaced with the community every day. While communities are not ‘cut-off’ from sites, most professionals involved in the construction stage found the process of managing the community during construction burdensome, arduous, time-consuming and costly. The risks of community consultation greatly outweighed the benefits for most, although the greater the contact between the community and project, the more positive this relationship became. The vast majority of construction professionals in our sample were ill-equipped to manage community concerns, lacked training in the process of community consultation and did not see the point of being trained in this area. Most considered it the planner’s responsibility to resolve these issues up-front before work starts on site. There was a perceived and distinct delineation of responsibility for delivery and consultation and when work starts on site, community consultation should cease and the focus should be on delivery with minimal ‘interference’ from the community. Where community consultation does occur, concerns are rarely acted on and the process is considered more of a token obligation than an opportunity to develop a partnership and work side by side with the community.

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