

RED FLAGS CATEGORY

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# Community Engagement



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Ford  
Foundation

# 20

## RED FLAG

# Tokenism in community engagement where engagement is not meaningful and is treated as a checkbox.

## AT A GLANCE

- Tokenism can indicate a lack of prioritization of understanding how technology affects impacted communities.
- To identify this red flag, ask about vendor's engagement with community advocates, the frequency and nature of the engagement, whether there was compensation, and how they handle any weaknesses identified by community-based organizations.

Tokenism is a performance by vendors to portray an image of community engagement without building relationships. This can indicate the deprioritization of understanding how technology affects impacted communities.

## EXAMPLE

A start-up that provides services to individuals impacted by incarceration claims to have the support of grassroots groups, citing endorsements from leaders within the interest groups. However, it is later identified that while the start-up may have had a one-time conversation with the interest group in the early ideation stages, the start-up did not maintain any standing meetings with the interest group during the actual implementation phase.

Thus, while the startup may have received endorsements for the product concept it is possible that the same interest groups do not approve of the final product itself.

## QUESTIONS TO IDENTIFY THIS RED FLAG

What civil society organizations and community advocates have you been in conversation with? How often and in what capacity (e.g. focus group, advisor)? Have they been compensated for their engagement?

If a company claims to be endorsed by a community-based organization, ask for the strengths and weaknesses that the organization identified. What guidance did the organization provide?

Can we reach out to them?

## RESOURCES

- [Participation is not a Design Fix for Machine Learning](#)
- [Statement of resigning axon AI ethics board members](#)

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## RED FLAG

**Products are not designed with the impacted communities centered. There is no meaningful community engagement in the process of needs assessment, development, and implementation.**

### AT A GLANCE

- Barriers such as language and timeline can lead to a lack of meaningful community engagement.
- To identify this red flag, ask about the vendor's definition of meaningful engagement, stakeholder mapping, which groups have been consulted, and their diversity in expertise, sector, demographics, and geography.

“Community engagement” is a term that one repeatedly hears from technology developers and deployers. The promise is to involve affected communities in the process of building and deploying a certain technology. There are several barriers to reaching “meaningful” community engagement:

One is language and culture. The language used strips agency from the communities being targeted or demonstrates hubris about the value it can bring.

Timeline is another issue. Often the timeline for assessing needs, co-designing, feedback, and piloting does not allow for sufficient consultation with the communities affected by the product, and/or the product was deployed before local communities had the opportunity to weigh in with their questions and concerns for use.

Mechanisms or processes for stakeholder engagement can become ineffective as well - it is not accessible (e.g. in-person vs virtual participation, time of the day), fully inclusive, or sensitive to issues of power, race, gender, and class. Sometimes feedback received from Community Review/Oversight bodies is treated more like a checklist without having any “teeth” in terms of actually affecting the government or vendors' decision-making process.

## EXAMPLE

Humanitarian applications of technology often purport to help clients and communities in need without engaging these communities in the design, implementation, and monitoring of these tools. Two examples are AI/algorithms for refugee resettlement (e.g. [Stanford Immigration Policy Lab](#), International Rescue Committee’s “Match” program), and the deployment of biometric identification, namely during COVID-19.

An entity may claim that there was too little time to incorporate feedback iteratively and consistently, or that communities were consulted at the outset - but not later on. The people designing the tool are also, more often than not, individuals without any lived experience.

# QUESTIONS TO IDENTIFY THIS RED FLAG

How do you define “meaningful” engagement?

## FOR THOSE WHO HAVE DONE STAKEHOLDER MAPPING

Which groups of people have you involved - and who have you overlooked or excluded, intentionally or not? Does the group of people you have consulted with represent sufficient diversity in expertise, sector, demographics, and geography?

Have you considered the mistrust of the justice system in a city by BIPOC or other marginalized communities?

How often do you speak with the affected communities and do you have any formal processes for doing so (monthly calls, focused groups, workshops, interviews, feedback channels)?

What is/has been your timeline for community engagement?

Did you use any virtual forums to gauge community feedback and interest?

## RESOURCES

- [Arnstein’s Ladder of Citizen Participation](#)
- [What Words We Use – and Avoid – When Covering People and Incarceration](#)

