

## **Community Engagement: For Whom?**

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### **Abstract**

Governments in Australia are increasingly concerned with engaging the broader community in the policy process. Emphasis on local knowledge and community empowerment is often characteristic of community engagement discourse. This paper discusses research into a Victorian state government project that aimed to engage a diversity of stakeholders in the rural development process, including community groups, citizens, industry stakeholders and other agencies. The findings of this research indicate that despite the best intentions of those involved in the project, it was implemented in a way that led to a primary focus on serving the needs of government. The research demonstrates that community engagement can be facilitated through a process of assimilation and marginalisation, whereby diversity and differences of community participants are compromised. The paper draws on a number of examples to illustrate this point and discusses the implications in terms of the requirements for genuine community participation and empowerment.

### **Keywords**

Community engagement, collaboration, natural resource management, diversity, role of government

### **Introduction**

Governments in Australia are increasingly concerned with engaging the broader community in the policy process. In the natural resource management context, governments recognise that the command and control model is problematic, because the uncertainty around many natural resource management issues means that there is no longer solid ground with fixed reference points that allow governments to map and manage change (cf. Beck et al. 1994; Shaw 2002). Natural resource management issues are contested, and governments can no longer rely on science to settle debates on the extent and nature of natural resource management issues and how these should be addressed.

The implication is that governments need to co-operate with other stakeholders to identify and negotiate problem definitions and solutions in the natural resource management context (Röling 2002, p. 27). Community engagement has therefore become an increasingly popular strategy

for government in this area. Emphasis on local knowledge and community empowerment is often characteristic of the emerging community engagement discourse.

However, proponents of the governmentality perspective that is inspired by the work of Foucault (1991) have critiqued the emerging co-operative approach, arguing that the emphasis on community engagement represents a new mode of government, where community is no more than a *means* of government (Rose 1996, p. 335). It is argued that through the implementation of co-operative initiatives, governments seek to establish rural subjectivities through which government objectives and programs are operationalised and implemented (Herbert-Cheshire 2000, p. 207; Raco 2003, p. 76; Rose 1996). In this paper we discuss research into a Victorian state government project that aimed to engage a diversity of stakeholders in identifying and addressing issues within the agriculture and natural resource management context, including community groups, citizens, industry stakeholders and other agencies. The findings of this research indicate that despite the best intentions of those involved in the project, it was implemented in a way that led to a primary focus on serving the needs of government. The research suggests that significant change is required in the way in which community engagement processes are implemented, if they are to facilitate genuine community participation and empowerment.

### **Our research approach**

Our research comprised a case study of the Developing Social Capability (DSC) project, which was implemented by the Victorian government Department of Natural Resources and Environment (NRE) and, when this department disbanded, the Department of Primary Industries (DPI). The stated aim of the project was "... to enhance the capability of people in the food and agriculture sector to manage change". In order to do that the project sought to involve a broad range of stakeholders in the identification of issues and the development and implementation of solutions around agriculture and natural resource management. In the words of DSC team members, the purpose of the DSC project was to:

“... be a catalyst for a whole-of-community approach to innovation and learning within the agricultural sector.”

And to:

“... help the 'NRE community' to learn that meaningful natural resource management is possible if we include the wider community as part of the team.”

Three pilot projects were implemented as part of the overall DSC project and within these pilots, the DSC project team acted as internal consultants to existing agricultural extension programs and projects to improve the way in which these engaged stakeholders and the broader community around specific issues.

The first pilot project involved NRE's Topcrop program that works with the grains industry to increase farm sustainability. The pilot project engaged a broad range of stakeholders to address the issue of stubble burning in Victorian cropping areas that had caused controversy in cropping communities for a number of years.

The second pilot project involved NRE's Environmental Best Management Practices (EBMP) project, which aimed to improve environmental management practices on farms. The purpose of this pilot project was to broaden the scope of the EBMP project and explore ways to engage the broader community in collective action within a catchment.

The third and final pilot was negotiated with staff from the fisheries group of the FarmBis program, which provides funding for primary producers to participate in training programs. The aim of this pilot was to increase participation of indigenous people in training and education services related to aquaculture.

Our research explored the way in which the DSC project and its pilots engaged the diverse stakeholders in the natural resource management and agricultural context. The DSC project was selected as the case study for our research because it promised to employ an innovative approach to change management that aimed to involve a diversity of stakeholders in the natural resource management process to an extent not seen before within NRE at the time.

The research was informed by the principles of action research, which was developed to bridge the gap between researchers and the researched through active participation in the research setting (Foote-Whyte 1991; Reason and Bradbury 2001). We participated to varying degrees in the DSC project team throughout the implementation of the project. One of us (the first author of this paper — as part of her PhD research) attended most meetings and a large number of events organised by the DSC project. As action researchers we contributed to the development of the project where we were able to on the basis of research findings. It is beyond the scope of this paper to describe and analyse this action research process in depth. For the purpose of this paper, suffice to say that as part of our participation in the project we collected extensive data, which included formal project documentation such as funding submissions, the project brief, tender documentation, interim and final reports of the DSC project and its pilots, position

descriptions, as well as extensive notes of 28 meetings organised by the project team, transcripts of two rounds of in-depth semi-structured interviews with all DSC team members (16) and pilot project team members (11). To add to this, we also analysed data collected by the project team itself, including notes of workshops (14), transcripts of focus group discussions with project stakeholders (10), and transcripts of notes of interviews (28) conducted by the pilot projects.

It must be noted, however, that while one of us became a member of the DSC project team, we did not participate actively in the pilot project teams. This paper is based on analysis of notes of team discussions about the pilot projects, two rounds of interviews with pilot project team members prior to and following their involvement with the project, a selection of transcripts and notes of interviews with pilot project stakeholders conducted by pilot project team members, notes of workshops and pilot project team meetings, as well as documentation supporting the pilot projects, including a discussion paper (Topcrop Victoria. Department of Primary Industries 2003), a conference paper (May et al. 2003) and the DSC project's final report (Department of Primary Industries 2004a).

In the following section we explore the way in which these pilot projects engaged community and industry stakeholders.

## **The pilot projects**

### ***The Topcrop pilot***

The first pilot project that we discuss is the Topcrop pilot. Staff of DPI's Topcrop program believed that a joint pilot project with the DSC team could assist in the development of a greater understanding of the issues around stubble burning. Stubble burning is considered by some as an effective way of dealing with stubble, yet it raises environmental concerns about the loss of remnant vegetation, air pollution and soil erosion. Many people in the grains sector anticipate that this practice will be banned in the future. A stubble retention system provides an alternative stubble management option which improves soil quality and yield in the long term, yet could result in stream pollution from greater chemical use for pest control (Topcrop Victoria. Department of Primary Industries 2003).

Stubble management practices by grains farmers concern a broad range of stakeholders, including farmers, the broader community affected by pollution from burning stubble, agronomists, flora and fauna staff of DPI, the Environment Protection Authority (EPA), the Country Fire Authority (CFA) and Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs). Not surprisingly

there are divergent views amongst stakeholders on what constitutes acceptable stubble management practice and as a result Topcrop facilitators find it difficult to provide consistent advice on stubble management to their farmer groups (Department of Primary Industries 2004a).

The issue of stubble management is one that has plagued the grains industry for quite some time and attempts to address this issue have been numerous. Just prior to its engagement with the DSC project, the Topcrop team was about to embark on a process to establish best management practices to deal with stubble. Topcrop staff were to conduct research into this issue through interviews with farmers and scientifically based field trials. The results from this research were to be extended to growers in the conventional transfer of information mode.

Instead a joint project was established between Topcrop and the DSC project to implement a participatory approach to identify how the broad range of stakeholders around stubble management could "... work together to reduce the environmental impact associated with managing stubble, while improving the effectiveness for production" (Department of Primary Industries 2004a). A project team comprising both DSC team members and two Topcrop staff members was responsible for implementing the joint project.

A broad range of stakeholders was identified in an initial brainstorming exercise conducted within the pilot project team. This list was expanded during interviews with these stakeholders. The final list included people well beyond the conventional scientist-adviser-farmer relationship that characterises much of the work in this area within NRE and DPI. It comprised farmers, service providers, agronomists, representatives from the CFA, the EPA and CMAs, but also end users of straw, conservationists from within and outside government and a representative from the Asthma Foundation.

Through a total of 52 in-depth interviews with stakeholders, the pilot project team explored how people perceived issues around stubble and stubble management, how people dealt with stubble, what opportunities people saw to improve stubble management practices and how they might work together to deal with stubble more effectively. Findings were disseminated in a discussion paper that was distributed to the stakeholders, and this document provided the basis for a workshop with stakeholders that aimed to develop action plans. At this workshop participants committed to a total of sixteen actions that included the coordination and development of a clear policy on stubble burning across the EPA, CFA, DPI and DSE; further research and development on related issues; and education of land holders on specific issues raised.

Following the conclusion of the Topcrop pilot project, DPI staff prepared an in-house policy paper to guide a stubble management working group. The work involved in the development of a more formal policy document that would serve the broader range of stakeholders could not be justified within DPI. A stubble management working group was established, but at that stage it failed to attract funding for projects. It was able to set up a number of stubble demonstration sites for research and extension purposes and it was anticipated that these could provide the basis for funding in a next round of allocation.

The Topcrop pilot delivered some significant networking benefits for participants. Connections between stakeholders were one of the main benefits reported by participants in the pilot projects, especially for Topcrop staff. According to a pilot project team member, the process brought together stakeholders who had not worked together in the past.

The policy shift towards sustainability requires that agencies such as DPI recognise that their clients comprise not just the farming community, but the broader community of stakeholders in agricultural issues. The Topcrop pilot was able to construct a platform for change that achieved that. As one staff member argued, the DSC pilot project allowed it to move away from advocacy on behalf of farmers towards an inclusive approach that takes account of the broader range of perspectives that prevail in the community.

Apart from the connections made between stakeholders, many participants reported that their views and perspectives on stubble management and farming practices were challenged and broadened as a result of their involvement in the workshop. On the whole, the above suggests that the pilot project succeeded in a reappraisal of the issue of stubble management by engaging a broad and diverse range of stakeholders in the issue.

However, in the case of the Topcrop pilot, learning involved primarily improving current ways of doing things, it did not extend beyond existing meaning schemes (cf. Bawden 1990, p. 312). Options for change discussed at the workshop included legislation, regulation, incentives, information dissemination, research and technology development. All of these are about doing more of the same, but better.

This lack of learning beyond existing meaning schemes was exacerbated by the limited time available to implement the pilot project. Furthermore, in the workshop the different views of stubble management were discussed alongside one another. The ambiguities and conflicting world views that underpinned these were never made explicit or explored. The workshop shied

away from exploring the uncertainties and ambiguities that derive from the tensions between the environmental and economic imperatives of stubble management. Such exploration may have enhanced people's awareness of the limits of their ways of knowing and opened them up to new communities of meaning, thus facilitating learning beyond prevailing meaning schemes.

Overall, the Topcrop experience suggests that a short-term project such as the DSC project can be successful in engaging a diverse group of people in an issue. However, it struggled to contribute to the kind of change it sought to deliver. While this pilot project did set out to be more inclusive of the diversity of stakeholders in stubble management, the strategies it brought forth limited participation in addressing the issue to scientists, farmers and extension officers. It could be argued that at the conclusion of the pilot project, the Topcrop team was back to the position it started from: implementing field trials and establishing demonstration sites for extension purposes within the context of a scientist-adviser-farmer relationship.

### ***The Environmental Best Management Practices pilot***

A second pilot that was established involved DPI's Environmental Best Management Practices (EBMP) project. This project started in February 2000 with the development of a set of benchmarks for environmental management practices on farms. This benchmarking process took one and a half years and involved a large number of farmers in southwest Victoria. Two workbooks were developed, one of which included ten worksheets that take farmers through a self-assessment process, and one action planning book that allows farmers to record how they intend to improve environmental practices on their properties. These workbooks were tested with farmers before facilitators were employed to work with approximately 400 land managers across 22 catchment groups in the Corangamite and Glenelg Hopkins catchments in southwest Victoria.

Facilitators implemented the EBMP project in three stages. In the first stage farmers used the workbook to assess and benchmark their environmental management practices against others in their catchment and across southwest Victoria. While farmers undertook their own assessments, facilitators collected and collated their data. One of the outcomes of the EBMP project was a database with extensive information about environmental practices in each of the catchments.

At stage two, farmers were provided with aerial photographs of their properties to assist with the development of action plans to improve their environmental practices. In a third stage of the EBMP project, facilitators tried to encourage farmers to work together as neighbours or sub-catchment groups in order to develop local area action plans. It was anticipated that this would

eventually lead to a more coordinated approach within catchments. However, while farmers were brought together in groups to discuss their results, the EBMP project had not yet succeeded in facilitating local area action planning at the time that the joint project with the DSC team was negotiated.

This joint project was designed to improve ways to facilitate collective action within the catchments and a project team that comprised two DSC team members and the EBMP facilitators was established to achieve that goal.

One of the key steps in this joint project was the identification of the pilot project stakeholders. This occurred through a network mapping exercise that involved staff of the DSC and EBMP projects. The list of people with an interest in community involvement in catchment health that was generated was used to invite people to a workshop to explore the issue further. This workshop was conducted according to the principles of Open Space Technology (OST), which was developed by Owen (1992). OST workshops invite people to participate in a forum organised around a specific theme. At this forum participants are given the opportunity to set the agenda as they are invited to convene discussions around issues relating broadly to the theme of the workshop that they feel passionate about. The forum becomes a self-organising workshop with participants taking responsibility for the sessions they run. Proceedings of the discussions are shared amongst participants. OST workshops are designed as stand-alone events and are based on principles that suggest that 'Whoever comes is [sic] the right people'; 'Whatever happens is the only thing that could have'; 'Whenever it starts is the right time' and 'When it is over it is over' (Owen 1992, p. 70).

The letter of invitation for the OST workshop to potential participants was designed around four focus questions to entice participation:

- How do catchment management activities and local environmental actions happen in your community?
- Who does what? Some people work in groups, others don't. What are the results of the different approaches?
- What activities have inspired you?
- Where have unexpected things happened when communities work together?

A total of 35 people attended the workshop, including land managers and representatives of local industry, landcare groups, CMAs, Greening Australia, 'Friends of...' groups, consultants, the local council, the EPA and water authorities.

OST events are often constructed around an almost spiritual atmosphere that aims to take people along a satisfying journey of collective productivity. Owen suggests that the process generates and is generated by love (Shaw 2002, p. 142). While the EBMP pilot workshop was never characterised by such a description, it was nevertheless conducted in a way that aimed to generate a sense of community and coherence amongst participants. In the process, issues were again raised alongside one another in a way that allowed people to participate from within prevailing meaning schemes. The workshop failed to address and explore in depth issues of misalignment, ambiguity, uncertainty and diversity that exist in relation to environmental management and catchment health. In critiquing OST, Shaw suggests that the emphasis on a sense of community can only create a very temporary sense of fellow-feeling that fails to come to terms with the multiple and conflicting ways of making sense of a situation (Shaw 2002, p. 145).

A further issue with this pilot was that the pilot project team worked with a problem definition that was developed by DPI staff. This pilot project did not facilitate a process whereby the issues were redefined through interaction and engagement with other stakeholders. In reflecting on this well after the conclusion of the project, a DSC team member suggested that:

“One key ingredient I think was missing (in my mind anyway), [which] was that the problematic situation needed to emerge from the stakeholders in the system, not be based on 'management' or the extension officers 'problems' alone. My impression is that neither [DSC team member] or [DSC team member] fully understood this at this point either or did not know how to put it in practice during negotiations — as they were involved in the first meeting with ... EBMP ... where the issue of 'collective action' in catchment management ... was selected for the EBMP pilot. Now I see this was an issue about how the Department and the EBMP project could facilitate collective action — our practice — not something other stakeholders necessarily saw as a situation which warranted attention ... Looking back this is a real point of frustration for me. And similarly with the FarmBis pilot.”

This approach to community engagement is one where the rationality of government prevails, and whereby communities are 'governmentalised' (Rose 1996, p. 353), as they are made visible and calculable by rational assessment procedures implemented by government. Within the EBMP pilot the development of a set of benchmarks for environmental management practices on farms, the subsequent implementation of a process to assist farmers in assessing and improving their own practices, and the development of a database that maps environmental practices across catchments using standardised assessment criteria, were all manifestations of a rational and scientific approach to environmental management. This kind of

participation does 'yoke' (Dean 1996, p. 61) the behaviour of farmers to conform to a rational mode of behaviour (Higgins and Lockie 2002, p. 426). This was not always a smooth process, and comments by EBMP facilitators suggested that farmers often did not take easily to the format of the EBMP workbooks. While farmers were consulted in the development of the benchmarks, and while the EBMP project team was responsive to farmer needs and displayed great willingness to continuously improve their tools to assist farmers, their approach nevertheless privileged a rational and scientific way of knowing. As such the EBMP project did not create the space for the construction of environmental practices within catchments that reflected the diversity of knowledge frames of the range of participants within it.

The DSC approach aimed to engage and create a space for a diversity of participants and their different ways of knowing and doing things. The principles underpinning the DSC project emphasised the need to involve people in the identification of issues and solutions for change in a way that would open up multiple pathways for change. However, in remaining within the parameters of the EBMP project, the pilot project operated within a framework that outlined a single pathway for change through the use of benchmarks. While the overall goals of the EBMP project team are worthy of respect, the approach used both within the project itself and the pilot project became a mere 'tool of government' that marginalised other ways of knowing and doing and consequently alienated or excluded farmers and other non-government stakeholders from active participation in the change process.

The final DSC report indicates that the main benefit of implementing the DSC approach in the EBMP pilot was the way in which the approach made the pilot team think more broadly about who the project's stakeholders were and enabled them to extend their networks (Department of Primary Industries 2004a). Pilot team members said they changed the way in which they operated as a result of their involvement in the pilot project, as they were usually involved in informing farmers, while the pilot project had made them realise the importance of listening to and questioning farmers before developing plans and strategies. Pilot team members also developed a greater knowledge of what others involved in catchment management were doing to improve environmental management.

Nevertheless, by operating within the parameters of the EBMP project, the pilot remained trapped within an approach that did not allow it to be truly inclusive of the diversity of people involved in catchment management by creating a space for their different ways of knowing and doing things.

### ***The FarmBis pilot***

The third pilot negotiated by the DSC project team was one that worked with the fisheries group of the FarmBis program to enhance participation of indigenous people in aquaculture education activities. The FarmBis program is an initiative funded jointly by the Commonwealth, State and Territory governments and provides financial assistance to primary producers to participate in business and natural resource management training programs. In Victoria the FarmBis program is delivered by the Rural Finance Corporation and DPI. The program aims to improve primary producers' "... business practices to make them more self-reliant and improve the profitability, productivity and sustainability of their enterprises" (Department of Primary Industries 2004b).

One of the goals of the FarmBis program is to increase participation of indigenous people in training and education activities (Department of Primary Industries 2004a). The FarmBis fishing industry co-ordinator saw a joint project with the DSC team as an opportunity to facilitate engagement of Koori people in discussions about their learning needs in aquaculture.

The concern about the process of 'government through community' that seeks to assimilate people into regimes of practice that serve the priorities of advanced liberal governments (Dean 1996; Rose 1996), raised in relation to the EBMP pilot, is even more pertinent in the context of the FarmBis pilot. However, this time these issues were discussed and debated within the DSC team.

The decision to focus on finding ways to engage Koori people in aquaculture education activities was made despite concerns raised in team meetings about the viability of aquaculture and the environmental issues surrounding it. Team members questioned whether it was really in the interest of Koori people to become involved in aquaculture. The viability of aquaculture was questioned, as were the environmental implications of this industry. This raised a further question about why the joint project should focus on aquaculture, why it did not just focus on a much broader question about community development or well-being in the Koori community and explore where FarmBis could contribute to this. However, these concerns were sidestepped as there was a strong sense in the DSC team that the pilot project needed the FarmBis program's 'buy-in' in order to be perceived as successful within DPI. The needs of the FarmBis program and its concerns about aquaculture and Koori participation then were first and foremost in the joint project. Again, as a result, the DSC project worked within the parameters of a government-initiated program in a way that failed to challenge its ways of knowing and doing. The aim of this pilot project was to deliver results to the partner program, rather than to the broader system of stakeholders, which resulted in it focussing on issues relevant to government.

This represented the very scenario that the DSC project was trying to redress — it focussed on and worked within the parameters of problem situations identified by the department itself, instead of engaging the broader range of stakeholders in (re-)defining problematic situations. It also represented the kind of scenario that post-colonial scholars are concerned with, as the change management process establishes a relationship between the knowing subject (self) — government staff — and its object (the other) — the Koori community — in a way that aims to be emancipatory and empowering, but actually erases and denies the subjectivity of the latter (Mohanty 1991; Spivak 1990).

Nevertheless, pilot project team members reported that the joint project with the DSC team had been very successful in improving their understanding of ways to engage indigenous people (Department of Primary Industries 2004a). The experience of people involved in this pilot project was overwhelmingly positive. For example, a development officer for the local Koori community suggested that:

“The aquaculture training program at [location] received extremely positive feedback from the participants. I must commend the efforts of the trainers in achieving appropriate rapport, trust and respect from the group. This is a major factor in achieving the desired outcomes for all parties involved. It is an extremely challenging task, delivering training programs to indigenous groups ... Since the introduction of [pilot team member] and his team the morale and motivation levels have improved considerably. If this can be kept up the results are anticipated to be a role model program for indigenous and mainstream groups in other areas” (Letter, October 2003).

Pilot team members suggested they would continue to use the approach in future project design and planning processes (Department of Primary Industries 2004a).

While the reported success of the FarmBis program is very encouraging and has enhanced FarmBis training development practices, indigenous people did not participate in the project development process. Their voice is only heard through FarmBis or DPI staff. Despite the success of the project, questions remain about whether the pilot project served the needs of the targeted community, or only those of the FarmBis program and a very limited subset of the Koori community. Only by speaking with stakeholders (including the broader Koori community) will DPI be able to create a space for the diversity of stakeholders to participate actively in the change process.

## Discussion

The experience within the three pilot projects raises significant issues about the way in which governments engage communities, and how this can be done in a way that marginalises other ways of knowing and doing, or by assimilating other stakeholders within prevailing ways of knowing and doing.

The DSC project and its pilots remained trapped in the very practices, structures and meaning schemes they were trying to redress. In the case of the EBMP and FarmBis pilots, project teams worked within the parameters of problem situations identified within the department, instead of engaging other stakeholders in the definition of problems statements and the development of solutions.

It is in response to this kind of community engagement that proponents of the governmentality perspective inspired by the work of Foucault speak of a 'technology of government', which is defined as a means of government that "... colonises a domain, a space, or an institution, to reshape it according to its own requisites, to maintain and intensify the relations of authority it makes possible..." (Dean 1996, p. 59). In other words, these policies "... not only impose conditions, as if from 'outside' or 'above', but influence people's indigenous norms of conduct so that they themselves contribute, not necessarily consciously, to a government's model of social order" (Shore and Wright 1997, p. 6). This is done by structuring the field of possible action, which shapes the conduct of subjects to align with the objectives of 'advanced liberal' governments (Dean 1996, p. 61). According to Dean, such 'regimes of practice' become technologies of government when:

" ... we can identify a complex assemblage of diverse elements, held together by heteromorphic relations, concerned with the direction of conduct ... Technologies of government are, in this sense, logistical. The powers they constitute are 'infrastructural powers' ..." ( Dean 1996, p. 64)

These technologies of government:

"... constitute domains and objects of knowledge, and produce 'diagrams' of truth about subjects ... [and] emerge from and inform the practical rationalities, forms of expertise and know-how that can render our being in the doublet of conduct performance" ( Dean 1996, p. 65).

However, while there may be a tendency to 'governmentalise' community, co-operative approaches also create new domains and territories for other parties to shape and direct policy (cf. Raco 2003, p. 79). It has been argued that the way in which various authors apply

Foucault's governmentality perspective and post-modern theory more generally constructs the gaze of government to be so totalising and pervasive that it leaves no space to establish an alternative and emancipatory or empowering agenda (Raco 2003, p. 77). As Stenson and Watt (1999, p. 200) argue, the gaze of government is not all-pervasive. Through the multiple interactions between government and community, prevailing discourse is continuously reformulated and in this process hybrid logics and practices emerge that to some extent do reflect the local agendas and do offer opportunities to pursue these further. In the case of the DSC project it must be noted that while the team struggled in developing and implementing a new approach within NRE/DPI, there was nevertheless significant learning and practice change as a result of people's participation in the DSC project. People do report they are doing things differently as a result of their involvement with the DSC project. Moreover, despite its struggles, the project has marked a space within the organisation from which to assert other ways of doing things (cf. Pathak and Rajan 1992, p. 260). The project serves as a reference point that makes explicit and visible the challenge to the prevailing ways of doing things.

What this means is that we must understand the context of change within which community engagement processes are implemented in terms of diversity, multiplicity, hybridity and fragmentation in the way that complexity theory suggests (Shaw 2002). Furthermore, the notion of a central locus of control must be abandoned. What is important is that we:

“... begin the task of anatomizing the new relations of power brought into play on this new multiple and fragmented territory of government. In doing so, we should not assume that all is for the worst ...We need to engage inventively with the possibilities opened up by the imperatives of activity and the images of plural affinities. The role of such analyses should not be to praise or to blame, but to diagnose, to identify the points of weakness that might be exploited if we are to maximise the capacity of individuals and collectivists to shape the knowledges, contest the authorities and configure the practices that will govern them in the name of their freedoms and commitments” (Rose 1996, p. 353).

One of the most important implications of the above is that community engagement processes need to be designed in a way that embraces diversity and other ways of knowing, if they are to genuinely engage the community. However, many of the processes and tools used by projects such as the DSC project focus on consensus building and creation of coherence between stakeholders. The use of OST in the EBMP pilot provides a good example. In both the Topcrop and the EBMP pilots, difference and diversity were left unexplored. This paper points to a need to reconceptualise the community engagement process. Instead of conceiving of it as a consensus building endeavour that seeks to transcend diversity and difference, where these

are considered as threats, errors and anomalies; it is important recognise that community engagement needs to be based on a focus on ambiguity and difference, if it is to be truly engaging and empowering of the community and other stakeholders.

## **Conclusion**

The implication of engaging the community in land management issues is that government's knowledge and perspective on the issues at stake can only ever be partial and contingent. What that means is that we are on the right track in instituting collaborative approaches — however, we need to become better at dealing with diversity if we are to avoid the risk of marginalising or assimilating other voices. The consequences of engaging communities for the way in which government works are profound if we want this engagement to be empowering.

It is the kinds of complexities raised in this paper that the debates about the way in which to engage communities in the decision making process need to focus on. How can government respond to such challenges and what are the institutional arrangements and funding structures that allow for issues to be dealt with in this fluid and flexible way?

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