

## Community Engagement — New Insights and Learnings from Practice

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### Abstract

The emphasis on community engagement in Australia and internationally in the last several years has led to considerable policy, training and practice. This builds on extensive, but largely intuitive, community engagement practice over previous decades. This paper reflects on the learnings and insights gained from a range of community engagement experiences and practice in Australia to inform the ongoing development of engagement processes. It draws on examples of practice including community renewal, learning communities, economic development projects, natural resource management planning, local government and a broad range of contact with communities and government.

Community engagement is not a matter of one 'best practice', but rather a flexible process of interaction based on key principles. Community engagement experience in a range of settings reinforces the following principles of good engagement:

- Continuity and sustainability of engagement
- Trust and local relationships
- Opportunities for deliberation
- Dealing with anger and the legacy of poor previous engagement
- Providing tailormade opportunities for various stakeholder groups to participate
- Coordination and avoiding over-consultation
- Joint influence over issues
- Community 'hubs' and existing communication linkages.

Important aspects of engagement that also emerge are:

- understanding the engagement 'needs' and aspirations of community members and groups
- engagement between community members and organisations within communities
- the development of networks of engagement, rather than engagement between two actors.

The paper discusses implications for agencies, organisations and communities in improving engagement practice including:

- principles, values and assumptions
- structures, services and mechanisms

- skills and improved practice
- organisational and community culture.

### **Emphasis on Engagement**

In the past several years there has been a particular emphasis on community engagement in Australia and internationally. This has mainly involved government, often at the state level, putting considerable effort into developing policies and arrangements to better communicate and work with community members. More recently, engagement of communities by local and federal government has also become prominent.

While community engagement has largely been seen as a government–community interaction, it has also become a priority for private sector companies and non-profit and community organisations. For example, there has been increasing interest by mining companies and land development enterprises to better engage local communities and citizens.

Moreover, the engagement that occurs between groups and individuals within communities, and the collaboration between communities, is increasingly being seen as crucial aspects of engagement.

This increased emphasis on community engagement has led to considerable policies, mechanisms, training and practice. Yet, it is important to recognise that engagement is not new. The current efforts build on extensive, but largely intuitive, community engagement practice over previous decades.

The additional profile and effort in community engagement has been due to many factors. For government, the perceived response to accumulating economic and social changes, particularly in rural and regional areas, has largely led to popular disillusionment. For some stakeholders, specific decisions and policies such as National Competition Policy have created further perceptions of government ‘not listening’ to citizens. However, on one hand, demands for greater involvement can be seen as part of the increasing general maturity of democracy in Australia, where citizens are expecting more participation with government. On the other hand, greater involvement is also likely to be driven by less trust and acceptance of representative democracy.

For private enterprise, community engagement is increasingly being seen as good business practice. There is also a more rationalist view that ensuring good community relationships is as important to continued business operation as meeting environmental standards.

## **Mixed situation**

The landscape of community engagement in Australia remains a mixed one. We have seen a directed effort by government to enhance their work with communities. Engagement is increasingly being considered in policy development, program planning and service delivery. Several major initiatives have been put in place to mediate communication between government and community members such as Community Cabinets and Regional Ministerial Community Forums. Training and development in community engagement has been expanded, such as the Queensland Government Community Engagement Training Package, and specific community engagement and development training has been developed in most other states. Major community development projects, such as the Community Capacity Building Initiative in Victoria and Community Builders, have incorporated extensive community engagement.

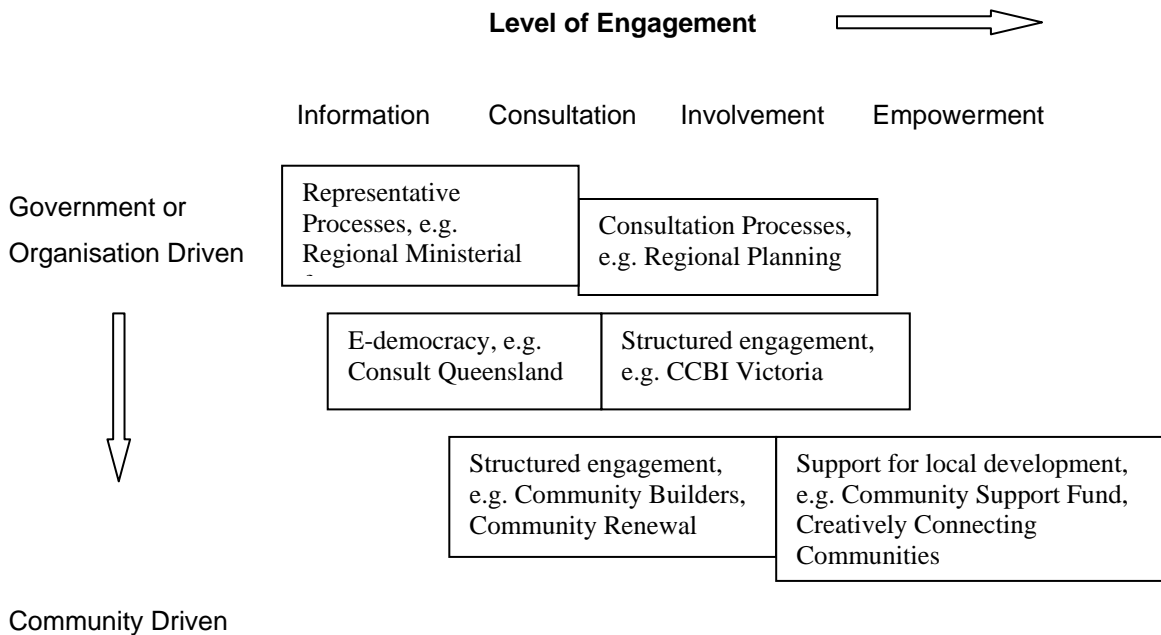
Yet, there remains inertia in seeing community engagement incorporated into everyday practice in agencies. While benchmarks for community change have been developed, most notably in Victoria, performance measures and evaluation frameworks for community engagement remain limited. Community engagement is only slowly being seen as 'real work' in many agencies and private enterprises. Engagement skills and roles are still largely seen as the province of a small number of specialist staff, rather than the everyday engagement of community members by 'technical' staff being more clearly recognised and supported.

Initiatives to enhance engagement are making progress on enhancing coordination and more appropriate approaches are being used. However, duplication and traditional approaches also remain, increasing the risk of over-consultation and over taxing community input. There have also been experiences of increased initial engagement without the necessary follow up and support to make contact and partnership fully sustainable. Some people remain cynical about the current emphasis on engagement and their ability to truly influence outcomes. More consideration needs to be given to the transition of disengagement and empowerment of community sectors.

This mixed picture reflects the ongoing cultural change involved in enhancing community engagement practice. Having intuitive interaction become more sophisticated and deliberate requires considerate change in the culture and practice of agencies, organisations and indeed communities. This change and the general development of community engagement still has a way to go.

So what have we learned from the engagement between community members, agencies, enterprise and even other community members? What insights can be drawn from the engagement experience that might inform improved practice?

The huge array of engagement experiences in Australia can be broadly thought of in terms of the level of engagement involved, and by the extent to which community, government or other organisations “drive” the process. Figure 1 illustrates broadly the general nature of engagement experiences on these two axes.



**Figure 1. A broad characterisation of the kinds of recent approaches to engagement approaches in Australia**

In Figure 1, engagement processes are shown by their main function and aligned broadly with the level of engagement and community or government control. Representative processes largely involve consultation and information between elected officials and community members. Consultation processes include input to largely government decisions. Structured engagement includes defined processes for involvement and partnership but with considerable community ownership. Activities that support local development have involved a large degree of community drive and empowerment.

**Issues raised by practitioners**

In my day-to-day work, I have gathered issues from a wide range of community practitioners working with communities in different settings across most states of Australia. Below I have listed

community engagement issues raised by practitioners including workers in major companies, neighbourhood houses, learning communities, and government agencies.

- Dealing with the 'cumulative' frustration of community members with previous engagement experiences
- Professional development including training and skilling, mentoring and overcoming the professional isolation that many practitioners feel
- Development of networks between practitioners and fostering collegiate learning
- Dealing with emotion and 'loud' people in communities
- Managing community expectations and reconciling them with legal requirements for engagement or action
- Making a judgement about how much engagement is 'enough'
- Preventing over-engagement
- Managing disengagement and transition to greater community empowerment
- Engaging the 'silent majority'
- Making the transition from agencies being 'providers' to working with communities
- Developing an internal organisational culture that better supports engagement
- Identifying and engaging appropriately with particular community segments various 'target' groups
- Evaluation and appropriate measurement of engagement practice and outcomes
- Fostering community networks and diverse partnerships
- Sustainable funding for community engagement.

These issues cover a diverse set of concerns ranging from the professional development of practitioners to broader policy approaches and the practical realities of working in communities. They illustrate the practice of working with communities and the need for internal change in agencies to better support engagement.

### **Key learnings**

The key learnings from community engagement practice have reinforced that community engagement is not a matter of one 'best practice'. Rather, it involves a flexible process of interaction based on the fundamentals of good engagement. Looking across a range of engagement experiences raises some of these key principles including the importance of local relationships, the continuity of engagement, having appropriate avenues for involvement, and dealing with anger and conflict.

### ***Trust and local relationships***

Successful engagement activities in Australia have depended on relationships and trust between individuals — between community members and with people in support agencies. At the community level, local personal relationships mediate collaboration between communities and government agencies. Relationships between agency staff and community members as well as the trust of ‘champions’ have been required for local people to be involved. Communication has meant far more than keeping people informed — the way people have communicated with each other has been important to building trust and respect.

Relationships have built on themselves with people developing stronger cooperative links as community work progressed. As actions took place, relationships grew, making planning and action easier and more comfortable.

While the technical expertise of agencies remains a vital asset, the value of an agency’s contribution to communities depends on their ‘relationship assets’. This challenges government and other organisations to combine service delivery with community input and participation. While service delivery is the primary function of government agencies, how those services are delivered can influence outcomes and either build or diminish their relationship assets. Agencies can foster relationships by supporting field staff, instilling a culture of community partnership and by maintaining continuity of contact.

### ***‘Go to them’***

Traditional approaches to engagement have mainly been based on specific events such as public meetings and workshops. While still an option, these events have required people to participate in semi-formal ways that require them to ‘come to’ government or industry.

These events can also self-select participants who are particularly confident, articulate and motivated about particular issues. They can easily present barriers for the participation of minority groups and others.

A successful alternative has been to ‘go to them’ — to consider and link with the natural hubs in communities that people congregate around such as a local school, sporting groups or community organisations.

### ***Opportunities for deliberation***

Engagement experiences have also highlighted the importance of fostering deliberation of community issues. In many communities there are limited opportunities for individuals and groups to openly share their perspective on issues. Many lobby groups rely on advocating a particular view to government and industry. Yet the discovery of new options and compromise depends on non-defensive deliberation and dialogue. Successful community engagement processes have created a 'space' for this to happen and provided a process for differences to be shared in a functional way.

### ***Dealing with anger and the legacy of poor previous engagement***

A major inhibitor of community engagement has been poor engagement experiences in the past, feelings of anger and disillusionment with the response of government and industry, and people feeling that they have no influence or seeing no change from engagement. The reality of many engagement experiences has been to try and re-engage with people or work with considerable community anger and frustration.

This increases the importance of engagement processes 'starting where people are at' — understanding and genuinely listening to frustrations and concerns. Part of the process of many engagement experiences has involved reflection on poor previous engagement and developing clear expectations. The rebuilding of trust has relied on small successful interactions and follow-up on visible actions. Personal reliability and relationships have been important to trust being slowly rebuilt.

### ***Coordination and avoiding over-consultation***

A complaint many community people have about engagement is the lack of coordination between agencies and others in working with communities. People become over-taxed in providing input and disillusioned with the ad hoc nature of engagement. There is an urgent need for agencies and others to have a coordinated approach to engagement where input to a number of agencies can be provided at one time, or where clear linkages between issues are considered prior to engagement. Cooperation between governments seems to work best on a focussed project. However, the broader networks and commitment developed by community efforts also provide a basis for collaboration between agencies.

### ***Tailormade opportunities***

Another learning from engagement practice has been the need to develop multiple ways for involvement that are suited to different stakeholders. Traditional engagement has often taken a 'one size fits all' approach and assumed that all who are interested can be involved. Modern

engagement practice has focussed on better understanding the ways various stakeholder groups prefer to participate.

### ***Continuity and sustainability of engagement***

There is still considerable effort required to better support the continuity and long-term sustainability of engagement. This involves the continuity of personal contact, ensuring engagement fosters local ownership and empowerment and better planning transitions between 'outside' support and community self-reliance. A key aspect of practice has been local facilitators providing an 'on the ground' presence in communities, connecting people to information and resources, and following up on plans.

### ***Networks of engagement***

Modern practice is fostering the development of, engagement between community members and organisations within communities, rather than engagement between just two actors. This is involving engagement that facilitates collaboration between communities and stakeholder groups, as opposed to relatively independent input to government or industry decision-making.

### ***Enhancing practice***

Australian experience has shown that community engagement relies on a diverse flexible set of principles, structures and methods. It is not just about increasing community participation in what government or industry does, but rather changing the culture of how community members relate to government, private enterprise and each other. It involves an incremental change process that incorporates 'old' and 'new' roles, builds on existing circumstances, and allows community linkages to mature and develop rather than simply proliferate.

Improved engagement practice challenges government agencies and other major organisations, to better manage duality. They need to manage representative and participative democracy — to not just be an enabler, but both a deliverer and enabler. Ultimately, improved practice needs to be based on the values and principles of appropriate engagement.

Developing community engagement practice involves four key aspects:

***Principles, values and assumptions*** — a clear set of values shared between agencies and communities that underpin community engagement and inclusion.

***Structures, services and mechanisms*** that mediate engagement including organisational structures, arrangements and processes that support relationships and collaborative networks.

***Practice*** — 'grassroots'-level attitudes, relationships, individual behaviour, techniques and methods form an everyday modus operandi for community engagement.

**Culture** — a culture of engagement needs to go hand in hand with structures and arrangements.

Developing these principles, structures, practice and culture involves incremental cultural change. Just as there is a risk of agencies engaging communities with traditional approaches, fostering this cultural change requires new assumptions and approaches. In many ways, practitioners need to apply the principles of community development to change within their own organisations.

As with communities building their own capacity, this involves practitioners in a relatively long term process that relies on internal 'champions' and enthusiasm, fostering agency social capital, 'starting small', addressing the existing concerns of staff, participation, demonstrating engagement, ways in which agency staff can be involved, consistent leadership, conflict management, realistic goals, and recognition of success.

Despite the complexity and uncertainty of an incremental change process, some suggested actions to progress improved practice are:

- high level leadership is required to 'champion' the principles of engagement and sustain new approaches to practice
- continued development of workable forms of accountability that better measure the 'quality' of engagement, and community capacity outcomes
- use of practical strategies to deal with competing needs, diversity and power relationships
- greater training and skilling in community engagement
- use of new forms of participation such as coalitions
- continued Investment in relationships
- greater development and exposure of 'beacon' projects.

## **Conclusion**

This paper is not a critique of particular approaches but rather a reflection on the approaches and learnings from current community engagement practice. Current practice represents a mix of traditional and innovative approaches to engagement illustrating an ongoing cultural change in improving practice. Ultimately, improving engagement practice is a capacity building process itself that ideally can be dynamic and can be self-reinforcing.