

# Measuring Community Engagement

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## Abstract

This paper outlines progress to date in Victoria in establishing what could become a national measurement framework for engaging communities. The paper locates the Victorian approach in the broader policy context of a renewed interest in community.

The paper outlines the Victorian approach, the logic of the indicators chosen and the key findings to date.

Initial findings include the:

- ability of the indicators to create new images of communities
- importance of local knowledge in shaping community engagement
- distinctively local nature of community strengthening patterns
- key role public administration plays in helping or hindering community strengthening
- centrality of local governments to shaping community strength
- strong correlation between the relative strengths of communities and the relative risk and protective factors for family units.

## Keywords

Community, indicators, policy, DVC, engagement

## Introduction

In recent years there has been a resurgence of interest in the nature and significance of 'community' in public policy deliberations (e.g. Smyth et al. 2005). Engaging communities is seen to be both a desirable end in itself linked to values of democratic participation as well as being of value because of correlations between participation and improved levels of social capital. More recently, correlations between engaged communities and economic growth have been promoted (Florida 2005), igniting further interest in the dynamic of community engagement.

From a public policy perspective it has proved relatively easy to measure the *outputs* of community engagement (such as increased levels of participation in sporting, cultural, recreational and civic life) but much more difficult to measure the *outcomes* of community engagement (or indeed to agree on what they are or should be). This lack of clarity around outcomes and measurement has led to many

governments winding back on their community engagement strategies or treating them as marginal enterprises within public policy. We've seen this as a mistake and have attempted to enter the debate focussing on how community can be made part of the public policy and management mainstream (Hess and Adams 2001). Our reasoning has been that since much of our life is lived locally in communities (be they communities of place, of interest, or of faith), understanding the drivers of community strength must be an important public policy activity. A principle factor in and indicator of community strength has emerged from our research under the general rubric of community engagement. Here we group all those interactions which allow individuals to participate in and establish ownership of their communities; even where the logic of the significance of community strength and its correlation with community engagement is accepted. However, we lack instruments to give policy validity to this understanding.

Developing the capacity to measure this engagement is a vital activity if it is to be legitimised as part of the mainstream of policy making and implementation. In this paper we make the case for community engagement strategies to be in the mainstream of public policy precisely because the connections with important policy objectives and outcomes can be demonstrated and measured. Measurement becomes a central issue by connecting the process (community engagement) to the outcomes (improvements in implementation in crucial policy areas). The actual connecting point is through indicators which can demonstrate both process (e.g. rates of participation) and outcomes (e.g. improvements in safety and wellbeing). While we are concerned to consider the hard realities of measurement as a practical issue in policy, we also wish to take account of a particular subtlety the act of measurement can bring to the government community interface. It is our belief, based on the Victorian experience, that the act of measuring community engagement adds value to the policy process beyond the production of the numbers which provide decision makers with such a sense of security and are, in any case, *de rigueur* for Australian policy advice. The subtle value in measurement in this case is that the indicators can also build a bridge between the theoretical abstractions (e.g. community engagement is democratic) and the practical reality (really knowing what a particular community wants/needs). The development of indicators creates metaphors and images that we have found helpful in illuminating the complexity of community engagement issues.

Our arguments are presented through the lens of the Victorian experience where over four years a consistent set of indicators has been established and progress measured. The key policy agency has been the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC). The character and *modus operandi* of the DVC itself has become a central issue in the Victorian experience. This paper provides a brief explanation of this but is principally concerned with the DVC's research-based efforts to develop measures of engagement. These begin from a focus on providing a better understanding of the policy agency of community and the ways in which public administration might need to change to promote community-oriented policies.

The research agenda required to achieve these outcomes is increasingly bringing together three themes. Firstly the focus on indicators of community engagement is providing real knowledge upon which to base continued learning both for public administrators and community players. These indicators have been used in the published and internal documents upon which this paper is based (DVC 2004, 2005).

Secondly the indicators themselves are throwing new light on central problems of policy which have been overlooked in the recent past. These particularly include the risk and protective factors associated with social wellbeing and economic prosperity. The use of these indicators is providing us with an increased ability to compare the links between community and individual/family strength.

Thirdly, evidence is emerging on how 'governance' factors intermediate both family and community level dynamics. This will be a focus for later research but was partly why we have chosen to use local government area boundaries to organise our research. We believe that the robustness and outlook of local institutions — and how they choose to organise — is a key determinant of community strength.

Ultimately our research program has a simple objective: "to understand how to increase the confidence and capacity of Victorians to play a greater role in socio-economic activity through exercising increased choice and control over their wellbeing and prosperity". At a policy level, the value of this research will be to inform governments and others on how to better allocate scarce resources and how to better organise the planning and delivery of services. The research on which we report in this paper is showing how public policy and management can re-capture the capacity to make and implement social policy.

### **Community agency and public policy**

Internationally, efforts in market-oriented democracies to re-balance public policy after its long domination by the instruments of new public management (NPM) have seen the re-emergence of community as a significant public policy idea. Understanding the impact and potential of this involves both a consideration of the practicalities of making something as loosely defined as 'community' work in decision-making processes, and unpacking the concept to discover its intellectual legitimacy. Our argument is that community is important to contemporary government because it brings new sources of knowledge to bear and that these are particularly relevant to contexts in which orthodox knowledge sources have failed to produce a satisfactory basis for decision-making and implementation. Depending on the context, the type of knowledge which comes from community engagement may be more important than the knowledge frames upon which public policy has traditionally relied. It is also, however, based on very different assumptions, and this makes it problematic within the organisational structures of public agencies. The symbiosis of appropriate knowledge and modus operandi in government under NPM reforms has reinforced a focus on expertise expressed as interest, issues and beliefs. This contrasts fundamentally with community-based knowledge which privileges place. While the claims of expertise are familiar and legitimate within our policy traditions and organisations,

those of location are yet to be established — apart that is from their corruption into parochial pork barrelling. A brief discussion of some history and some epistemology will restate the argument which we have elaborated elsewhere for the significance and characteristics of community agency in public policy (Hess and Adams 2002).

Australia, having spent two decades perfecting NPM, began following the trend (back) toward community engagement in the late 1990s. By 1998, Prime Minister Howard was using the language of the European liberal democrats in declaring to the World Economic Forum that “we believe that social capital and the building of networks of trust and understanding in national and local communities are vital if those communities are to respond constructively to the challenges of change” (Howard 1998). By the time of the Australia Unlimited Roundtable in April 1999 Mr Howard was identifying “a new social coalition of government, business, charitable and welfare organisations and other community groups — each contributing their own particular expertise and resources in order to tackle more effectively the social problems...” (Howard 1999).

This re-emergence of community as a policy factor at the conjunction of hard headed financial management and soft hearted social orientation clearly required explanations, not least because of the contradictions inherent in this logic. We’ve attempted an academic approach to these issues in earlier work (Hess and Adams 2001). Back in the practical world of public policy and management, however, the re-emergence of community was significant because of the new knowledge bases and processes it opened up, but these had not been spelt out in detail. Nor had they evolved into instruments for policy-making and implementation.

At the level of identifying the appropriate knowledge base for making public policy decisions, the problem facing governments was that for 20 years the NPM focus privileged expertise from market sources as the dominant knowledge source. As high policy, NPM attempted three things. First, it attempted to diminish the role of the state and make the bureaucracy more responsive to political leaders. Second, it aimed for greater efficiency through the use of private sector management techniques. Third, it focussed on the citizen as a customer and service recipient (Aucoin 1990, p. 16). As day to day public administration this focus on market-based knowledge was reflected in almost all aspects of the public sector activity from recruitment focus (towards managers and accountants and economists), through the types of strategies deemed relevant to address problems (user choice/user pays), to the instruments of implementation and service delivery (contracts and competitive tendering). Such ideas and instruments achieved normative status under NPM and, despite their relatively narrow knowledge base, were applied across the board to areas as varied as economic, social and environmental policy.

The ideas and practice of the NPM produced increased efficiency and during the period of their dominance overall increases in productivity ‘externalities’ were significant. Its narrow focus on economic knowledge, however, created difficulties of two kinds. The first were those which arose from

the exclusion of consideration of other knowledge frames. The second had to do with the positivist basis of economic knowledge. Both have direct implications for the practicalities of policy and management but are underpinned by some deeper intellectual problems. One has to do with epistemology — how the knowledge is created and valued. Our argument here has been that historically public administration applied ideas and used instruments arising from frameworks of knowledge and meaning which were relatively stable (Hess and Adams 2002). They changed quite slowly over time and were closely linked to socially normative concepts underpinning and legitimising administrative action. In the 1990s NPM privileged functional knowledge drawn primarily from economics and management pushing other knowledge frames into the background. This was consistent with earlier changes insofar as it continued the reliance on knowledge provided by experts, even if they were drawn increasingly from outside the administration itself.

Community knowledge, by contrast, is interpretive, inductive and iterative. The implication of a community-based approach is that appropriate public knowledge is no longer seen as a given to which administrations will have privileged access through expertise, authority and familiarity. This involves an understanding of the nature of relevant knowledge and of the issue of how to make it useful for solving a problem or taking an opportunity at the level of action. It starts from the assumption that knowledge needs to be constructed and mediated through a cooperative process of discovery with those affected by it. The level of certainty about the meaning and utility of knowledge is itself the central purpose of inquiry. Some aspects of how this might work out in practice can be seen from the way in which Victorian governments have used the community focus to generate knowledge and processes which address problems beyond the scope of more orthodox approaches.

In the 1990s Victorian governments went further than other Australian public administrations in implementing NPM (Alford and O'Neill 1994). Since 2000 they have led the way in seeking to build on the financial benefits of those reforms, while balancing them with social considerations. In many ways these developments parallel those in other market-oriented democracies as governments seek to balance economic and social orders of necessity in their management of public policy and service delivery. We have identified these changes in terms of the insertion of social knowledge and community-oriented instruments into the policy-making and implementation processes and have been concerned to illuminate both its theoretical underpinnings and practical implications.

In the aftermath of the 1999 Victorian election, the incoming Labor government determined that one area in which it would differentiate itself from its predecessor was in its approach to public management. Under the rubric of 'innovative state, caring community' it developed a whole-of-government policy, which bracketed NPM efficiency objectives with human and social capital areas identifying place and community as the loci for these new elements (Victoria 2001).

The development of the policy was based on a broad appreciation of international practice. The actual implementation has, however, proven to require orientation to local circumstances in which the

international models have proven less useful. The major structural innovation has been the creation of a new department, the Department for Victorian Communities, in 2002. The preposition, *for* rather than *of*, was intended to be significant. This new department was not to be a vehicle for delivering policy in the particular location of communities — of doing something *to* communities. Rather it was to be an advocate for an approach to the development and delivery of policies focussing on communities of interest and places, through the medium of communities of location. It was to do something *in* and *with* communities (Hess 2003). The ambition was to achieve an integrated, whole-of-government approach to areas of need for which the fragmented approaches of competing policy silos, working on narrowly focussed expertise, had proven to have no answer.

The theoretical underpinnings of these policies range from economics' 'cluster theory' (Porter 2000; Florida 2003) to geography's new regionalism (Cooke and Morgan 1998), social capital (Putnam 2000) and complexity theory. What they have in common is an acknowledgement that place will be a vital and different category in decision-making. This has implications for the nature of agency. Traditionally public administrative action has been based on expertise with agency resting with the experts in particular fields. Where place is privileged, however, agency shifts to networks. Political scientists have long identified policy networks as significant and have mapped their influence (Rhodes 1997; Considine 2003). The networks that have emerged as significant in the Victorian experience of community engagement go beyond this in that their claim upon the policy process is a claim based on place and the knowledge which arises from place-based engagement. While the Victorian experience is very much a work in progress, we believe that it has taken significant steps to understanding the relationship between place, agency and the issue of how governments can best invest resources to strengthen community engagement. Among the lessons we believe we have been learning are some related to measuring community engagement.

### **The Victorian approach to measuring community engagement**

The DVC set out to measure factors related to community strength because of the increasing international evidence that, in market oriented democracies at least, social capital factors captured in measures of community strength, played unacknowledged but crucial roles in determining the outcomes of policy interventions. Over the past three years, however, the focus has moved increasingly on to the extent and nature of community engagement. In part, this is because strength measures generate league tables which may be unhelpful. It is also, however, because the fact of engagement of people in their communities has proven a better predictor of a community's capacity than the presence of other 'advantages'. It now appears to us that it is in engagement activities that a community generates the knowledge it needs to be a successful partner in economic growth and social wellbeing.

The validity of this focus on community engagement arises from the way in which we have come to view the characteristics which make communities strong. DVC defines strong communities as those endowed with social, economic and environmental assets *and* organisational structures that work

towards their sustainable use and equitable distribution (DVC 2004). Strong communities are built by community members who are engaged, participate, feel capable of working through problems and are supported by strong networks (Lin 2001; Gilchrist 2004; DVC 2004). Strong communities can therefore be seen to arise from the interplay of four features:

- *The economic/natural/human/social capital assets* a community is endowed with (for example, schools and trained teachers)
- *The knowledge within the community* that allows for the sustainable use of assets (for example, how a community understands and values education)
- *The ability to collectively organise* in order to work through issues, determine priorities and make the best use of resources (for example, actively engaged staff and parent bodies)
- *Local institutions* that provide governance structures through which collective action can be organised (for example, school boards and committees linked to government, other local institutions and businesses).

Because of the connection we have come to see between engagement and strength, the DVC indicators of community strength focus on aspects of connectedness and local networks that underpin governance arrangements. Some of the DVC indicators describe the outcomes of connectedness such as community safety, feeling there are opportunities to have a say, tolerance of diversity and the ability to get help when needed. Others focus on the forms of participation that enhance social connectedness and lead to local network formation. Internationally there is evidence to suggest that the simplest forms of participation, such as attending events and helping neighbours, are the precursors of strong networks that ultimately lead to collective action and strong governance arrangements in local areas (Perkins et al. 1996; Moen 1992; Wollebaek and Selle 2002).

The benefits of participation have also been shown to extend to personal and collective wellbeing reflected in: better physical and mental health; higher educational achievement; better employment outcomes; lower crime rates; decreases in maltreatment of children; and an increased capacity for a community to respond to threats and interventions (Granovetter 1974; Coleman 1988; Tomison 1996; Vinson et al. 1996; Porter 1998; Berkman and Glass 2000; OECD 2001; Lin 2001; Szreter and Woolcock 2004). Overall this body of research claims that community engagement diminishes the impacts of social disadvantage (Gerard 1985). Specifically in Victoria, the 2003 *Community Adversity and Resilience Report* (Vinson 2004) showed that social cohesion, measured by participation in sport and ability to get help when needed, is associated with lower levels of negative social outcomes such as increased rates of imprisonment and early school leaving. The association between participation and physical wellbeing noted internationally (Young and Glasgow 1998; Berkman and Glass 2000) is also reflected in the DVC findings (DVC 2004). So participation also has an independent positive effect on health (Young and Glasgow 1998). Given the weight of research opinion, it is hardly surprising to find that governments are trying many practical ways to enhance citizen participation as a means of addressing the specific problems and priorities of local areas (Coleman and Gotze 2001; Gilchrist 2004). This logic culminates in the view that it is through the combined 'knowledge,

experience and capability of different agencies, officials and community groups' that the solutions to the most complex and pressing problems are developed (Considine 2004). One dilemma this creates is that to enhance engagement with communities, governments will need to change the way they currently work. New institutional arrangements, instruments, toolkits, skills and cultures in public administration are needed to support and build the networks and local institutions that are critical to community strengthening outcomes (Hess and Adams 2002).

### **Victorian measures of community engagement**

While that's another story it does indicate that community engagement thinking and practice in Victoria have now developed to the point at which they are generating data on which research findings can be based. DVC has gone about building this research from both existing data sets and new purpose-collected data. Where new datasets have been created care has been taken that this is done in partnership with others (NGOs, local councils, etc). This both acknowledges ownership and minimises transaction costs. Many of our data sets are generated as by products of other pieces of research. We often 'piggy back' on the work of others and in doing so put our work into the mainstream of research related to particular policy areas rather than on the margins. This also enables important correlations to be explored for example between community engagement data and health status (VPHS 2001–02, p. 40).

Often long-established data sets relating to specific policy or service delivery activities contain unexplored relevance for measuring community engagement. For example rates of default and disconnection from energy (i.e. the power being cut off) can tell us a lot about community dynamics. Digging into this data has provided evidence that levels of power disconnection have less to do with economic status than with social factors, such as how close users live to their electricity supplier. Where customers are able to readily access company staff they are less likely to suffer disconnection. By contrast in communities which are distant from the supplier trust between supplier and purchaser is lower and disconnections more frequent. The point is that data on energy defaults is available for the past 100 years — a rich source of information especially if it is cleverly correlated with other sources.

The most recent DVC research report, *Indicators of Community Strength at the Local Government Area level in Victoria* (DVC 2005) builds on the previous work of the *Indicators of Community Strength in Victoria* report (DVC 2004). The latter took time series data relating to 11 indicators of community strength from the Victorian Population Health Survey and applied it to four local government areas (LGAs). The 2005 report adds to this by examining the indicators of community strength across all 79 LGAs in Victoria. It includes four new indicators not included in the first report: parental participation in schools; participation in organised sport; participation on decision making boards and committees; and liking the community in which you live. The full set of indicators can be seen in Table 1.

**Table 1. Community strength indicators from the DVC report**

<b>Community attitudes</b>	
1.	Feeling safe walking down your street alone after dark
2.	Feeling valued by society
3.	Feeling there are opportunities to have a say on the issues that are important to you
4.	Feeling that multiculturalism makes life in your area better
5.	Liking the community you live in *
<b>Participation</b>	
6.	Attendance at a community event in the last six months
7.	Participation in organised sport * +
8.	Volunteering
9.	Being a member of an organised group such as a sport, church, community or professional group
10.	Being the member of a group that has taken local action in the last 12 months
11.	Parental participation in schools *
12.	Participation in decision making boards and committees *
<b>Ability to get help when needed</b>	
13.	Ability to get help from friends, family and neighbours when needed
14.	Ability to raise \$2000 in two days in an emergency

\* New indicators not included in the first report (DVC 2004).

+ Created from two years' data (mid 2001–mid 2003) from the *Exercise, Recreation and Sport Survey* (ERASS).

It should be noted that these indicators are not local government indicators. The phenomena they report on arise from the combined actions of local, state and federal governments, business and the community itself. LGAs have been used in this DVC research because they are the smallest area level that a sample can be drawn from in Victoria at reasonable cost. It is also a common area level used for the collection of other social outcomes data (education, police, etc), which will allow for comparison with other data sets in subsequent reports.<sup>1</sup> One immediate problem in using LGAs for research on community engagement is that communities do not fall neatly into administrative

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<sup>1</sup> DVC is beginning to use the indicators of community strength at the LGA level in Victoria to track progress towards its goal of building strong communities. It is also examining the drivers of community strength and the relationship between the indicators to other outcomes that are important to government such as education and crime. The results of this research will be reported in the third report in this series.

boundaries. So for planning purposes these indicators need to be supported by other research that provides detailed information about communities.

The key finding which emerges from this local area-based data is that community engagement has a different character across the LGAs of Victoria. Differences between rural and metropolitan LGAs are striking, with rural areas generally scoring higher than the metropolitan areas on all indicators. Every LGA has strengths and no single area has low scores on all indicators. For example, Whittlesea has lower levels of volunteering than other metropolitan areas but has higher levels of parental participation in schools. Attitudes also vary greatly across areas. For example, the proportion of the population that feels 'safe on their street alone after dark' ranges from 40 per cent to 90 per cent while those that feel there are opportunities to have a real say on issues ranges from 41 per cent to 75 per cent of the adult population across LGAs (DVC 2005). In terms of participation, volunteering ranges from 35 per cent to 68 per cent and parental participation in school ranges from 50 per cent to 75 per cent of all parents across LGAs. In terms of social isolation, as measured by the percentage of people who could not get help from friends, family or neighbours when needed, the level ranges from eight per cent to 22 per cent of LGA populations.

These differences emerging at the level of community engagement indicate a need for area specific approaches. If community is to be a useful factor in public policy and management there can be no 'one size fits all' prescription and it is essential to consider the particular character of local areas when developing policies designed to improve community strength.

### **What Victorians think makes a good community**

Before getting to that discussion, however, the DVC research has been concerned to establish some benchmark data around the issue of public perceptions of community and engagement. Table 2 uses factor analysis<sup>2</sup> to provide a general picture of what Victorians thought were the important characteristics of communities. The characteristics fell into four categories:

- activities that build a secure future
- good local services and facilities
- pleasant local people and environments
- opportunities to participate (DVC unpublished data).

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<sup>2</sup> Factor analysis simplifies survey data by grouping responses which have a high correlation with each other and a low correlation with other variables.

**Table 2. Factor analysis of the characteristics of communities that Victorians think are important**

	<b>Percentage of Victorians that consider important</b>	<b>Percentage that think describes own community</b>	<b>Percentage difference</b>
<b>Category 1: Building a secure future</b>			
People feel safe and secure	95	61	33
The government is responsive to local needs	78	23	55
People have opportunities to participate in the decisions made by government	72	26	46
There are good work opportunities available locally	70	28	42
<b>Category 2: Local services and facilities</b>			
Good local facilities and services (shops, childcare, schools, libraries, etc.)	92	73	19
There is easy access to parks, bike tracks and recreational areas	79	74	5
<b>Category 3: Pleasant local people and environments</b>			
People are friendly, good neighbours, help others	90	62	28
It's a pleasant environment, nice streets, well planned, open spaces, no pollution	89	68	22
People look after their properties	83	67	16
The community has a distinct character, it's a 'special place'	57	54	3
<b>Category 4: Opportunities to participate</b>			
There's a wide range of community and support groups (sports clubs, neighbourhood houses, etc.)	79	62	17
It's an active community, people do things and get involved in local issues and activities	68	46	22
There are opportunities to volunteer in local groups	61	57	4
Local business support local initiatives by donating time or money	68	42	26
There's a good mix of people of different age group, incomes, cultural backgrounds, etc.	68	70	-1

The outstanding finding to be drawn from this data emerges in the right hand column. This sets out the differences between what Victorians feel is important and what they feel is present in their communities. In order to have relevance DVC's community strengthening strategy needs to be

located in this gap between what 'should be' and what 'is'. Nowhere is the risk of not doing this more apparent than in the finding that while 'government that is responsive to local needs' was considered important by three quarters of Victorians, only one quarter felt this was the case in their local area (Table 2).

## **Conclusion**

So how is this research contributing to our ability to understand what works and what doesn't work in terms of community engagement?

DVC research indicates six areas which we believe require attention if we are to achieve the levels and types of community engagement which have been shown to contribute to the creation of strong, resilient communities. The first is creating images of community which have efficacy for public policy and management. Approaches that focus on programs delivered by vertically organised agencies produce distorted and fragmented views of community. DVC's use of indicators based on people and places creates a set of images of communities as they are experienced by the people in them. Moving the focus of data from the program to the place does contribute to a different policy perspective. More subtly and more importantly, however, this type of information creates a picture of how specific communities work. In doing this it provides essential baseline data for community focussed policy making and implementation.

The second area to which this research draws attention is that local knowledge is crucial. This is something we have lost sight of in the modern program oriented world of public policy and management dominated by the cult of expertise, whether it comes from within the bureaucracy or from 'independent' contractors. Local knowledge is not something which can simply be 'tapped' into through 'community consultation'. It is not an objectified reality to be extracted and fed into the policy machine. As the pre-eminent post modernist Zygmunt Bauman argues, local knowledge has to be *invented* rather than discovered (Bauman, 2000). We are only just rediscovering the parameters of local knowledge and its sensitivity to shocks — such as the loss of 'agoras' (for example the rapid loss of public parks and other spaces in cities throughout the world). Engagement activities are essential to this invention of knowledge because they throw people together in endeavours which focus attention on local needs and capacities. The knowledge this creates is about ourselves, each other, and how we can work together.

The third area of focus called for by our data is that community strength is a distinctively local phenomenon driven by a mix of local and global factors. So far our research shows just how much community strength can vary from neighbourhood to neighbourhood. This is, however, merely the beginning of the issue of how locality drives and changes needs and behaviours. Further research is planned to look more closely at the innovative potential of locality factors. Given that government policy tends to be program-sensitive rather than place-sensitive, this is an important issue because current policy structures fail to comprehend locality and therefore miss its innovative potential.

Our fourth issue is that public administration matters. Many good community engagement ideas have and continue to come to grief on the rocks of public administration. For example, proposing indicators that are disconnected from the levers of government and resource allocation models is a guaranteed path to failure. The community engagement agenda challenges much of the orthodoxy of public administration — such as the dominance of the program format. The art of change is to take the time to work new ideas, new cultures, new structures and new instruments into the mainstream and away from the margins. Strong leadership, clear political authorisation, community backing and a good dose of resilience are critical to seeing this agenda through.

In the past, government policy has focussed on providing assets and skills rather than on collective organisation and governance structures. However, it is collective organisation and governance structures that sit behind the effective claim over, use and distribution of assets and skills. Communities that have strong governance arrangements are better able to use and distribute their existing assets and make claims for resources that are appropriate for their needs. For governments this may mean directing investment in different ‘connecting activities’, such as recreation, learning and volunteering programs, in order to build community strength in different areas. It may also mean changing the way services are delivered in order to be flexible to the differing local circumstances indicated in this report.

To researchers from earlier periods of public administration our next conclusion may have been obvious but the extent to which local government matters surprised us. The extent of variations between local government areas was not merely an issue of geographical (dis)advantage. The research indicated that strong local governments which are well connected to their communities generate community strength. For example, in Swan Hill a local school had concerns about government funding for a stand-alone basketball court because they felt Swan Hill did not need another single-use facility. Instead they joined with their local government and other local groups to lobby state government for funding for a comprehensive sports and leisure centre that provides a range of services to all residents of Swan Hill as well as to the school. This partnership has led to the creation of a significant piece of infrastructure for the whole community that can be more easily managed than a large number of single-use, single-user facilities. In this example a strong community has increased its assets in a sustainable way and has improved the quality of life for all its residents. There are major implications here for the future of local government as the ‘stewards’ of community strengthening, an issue we are canvassing in Victoria (Considine 2004, 2005). One of the more important implications is the need to invest in the capacity of all local institutions to create the conditions for the emergence of community strength. Those conditions involve for example distributed leadership; access to and valuing of local knowledge; local ‘agoras’ or meeting spaces; and access to various forms of communication.

Not surprisingly we are also finding considerable evidence that families, however they are constructed, will emerge as significant factors in community engagement and strengthening. The communities' agenda is now at a point where we can forecast the next steps and we believe that one of those steps is to reconnect the evidence about the drivers of strong communities with the evidence about the drivers of strong families. In related research, strong correlations have been identified between the community level indicators and indicators of the risk and protective factors associated with individuals and families and in particular with risk and protective factors for young people. Thus, for example, we are now able to specifically identify schools and neighbourhoods where low rates of participation and retention are correlated with low levels of community engagement. More importantly we are able to identify both 'causes' of low levels of engagement and those local strategies most likely to increase engagement. In short, local community level interventions can now drive improved educational participation retention and completion rates. This requires an understanding of both family dynamics and community dynamics. It is the conjuncture of these that we believe will be the focus of research effort over the next few years.

The community engagement agenda internationally has a patchy record of changing the policy settings of governments; in part — as we have argued here — because of the failure to adequately ground new ideas and practices in ways that both resonate with existing policy concerns of governments while simultaneously pointing to a different future. Indicators can form the bridge between the rhetoric and the reality by highlighting in a common sense way the workings of community dynamics. We may still not fully understand the 'causal chain' at work and indeed there may be no causal chain just a myriad of interconnected influences at work. What we do know however is that features of strong communities are highly desired by the public and that government levers can influence the emergence and sustainability of those features.

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