

Engaging Culturally Diverse Communities by Engaging Local Government: The LAMP Program

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Abstract

Local government is often described as the sphere of government most able to engage communities. This is because its services are more immediate and more accessible to people in a local area, its decision-making processes are more responsive to local community need and its democratically elected representatives are more directly connected to the grassroots issues of community debate.

In responding to the need of increasingly culturally diverse communities, this image of responsive local government faces several well known challenges. For example, language and cultural barriers can hinder access to services for some groups in the community. Far from being responsive, the processes of identifying community need can sometimes be solidified into responding to historical precedent rather than emerging realities. The elected council may itself not be not reflective of the diversity of the community.

Underpinning these general challenges there are two significant institutionally entrenched limitations that hinder the development of the local government sphere as the vehicle for engagement of culturally diverse communities. Firstly, local government has historically been responsible for the community's 'hard' infrastructure and has taken on responsibility for the 'soft' issues of community development, community relations and community wellbeing with varying degrees of enthusiasm or reluctance. Secondly, local government is cautious about accepting responsibility for issues it regards as a state or commonwealth responsibility without transferral of resources, and it is frequently the case that multiculturalism may be regarded as a policy agenda of the state.

The Local Area Multicultural partnership (LAMP) program is one program that seeks to address these complexities.

LAMP is a partnership between the Queensland Government and participating local governments designed to improve access to services, promote an acceptance of diversity in the community

and facilitate engagement between the institutions of local government and the cultural diverse communities they serve. It does this by working with local government to develop strategies that are embedded into the core business of the local government itself. It works to engage culturally diverse communities by engaging local governments in the process of understanding and responding to the issues of diversity in its area of planning responsibility.

This paper will showcase the LAMP model of partnership between spheres of government and provide practical examples of successful engagement that have been achieved.

Introduction

This paper is about the vision of Local Area Multicultural Partnership Program, a partnership between the Queensland Government and local governments in Queensland, which set out to engage cultural diversity, not from the edge but from the centre.

Local government has often been described as the sphere of government most able to engage communities.

This is because its services are more immediate and more accessible to people in a local area, its decision-making processes are said to be more responsive to local community need, its elected representatives are more directly connected to the grassroots issues of community debate and its officers live and work in the community they serve, while those of us who work for the state and federal bureaucracies might sometimes be seen as just that bit more removed from the daily reality of community life.

But how does this image of community responsiveness stack up against the reality of local government relationships with the rapidly changing communities they serve? How are Queensland's local governments engaging with the cultural, linguistic and religious diversity that now visibly characterises many of Queensland's local communities?

It was these questions that led the Queensland Government and Queensland's local governments to work together in a partnership aimed at enhancing the capacity of local government to engage with diversity. This partnership program, which has been formally in place since 1998, is called the Local Area Multicultural partnership program (LAMP program).

The idea of LAMP was originally formulated out of an action research project undertaken by the Queensland Government and seven local governments in South East Queensland in the early 1990s. Research in this project produced a report, Structures for Diversity.

The key finding of this research was that local governments were very willing to engage with diversity but that at that time they had no (or very few) systems and structures in place and limited knowledge to enable them to do so. It noted that engagement with diversity happened on the periphery and that, for it to work, it needed to be moved into the core of local governmental business; hence the title of the report.

In 1996 and 1997, a pilot project based on the structures for diversity research was undertaken again by the Queensland Government in partnership with the Gold Coast and Ipswich City councils. Its aim was to take the recommendations in the structures for diversity report and to develop practical guidelines and toolkit information that could be used by local governments to assist them move their engagement with diversity from the edge to the centre

In 1998, under the newly elected Beattie Government, these ideas were developed further and LAMP itself was formally established and resourced as a partnership between the state and local governments.

Since 1998, the state government has committed over \$8 million to this partnership to enable councils to recruit multicultural community relations officers, develop and implement multicultural community relations plans and support local projects that promote acceptance of and engagement with diversity in the community.

But a key question remains. What kind of engagement? What is multicultural community engagement? What are we saying about who is engaging with whom and about what when we say engage with cultural diversity?

The LAMP program has attempted to answer those questions by placing itself firmly within the principles of Australian multiculturalism. It is guided by the reasonably simple notion that everyone in Australia should have equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from all aspects of life, regardless of their background, and conversely that nobody should be subject to unfair discrimination because of their background.

So LAMP is a lot more ambitious than simply asking local governments to consult with culturally diverse communities. It aims at assisting local governments not just to engage with culturally diverse communities but to work towards the building of inclusive communities as a result of that engagement. It does this in order that what is happening in local communities supports the intent

of multiculturalism as a broader national policy that is (or should be) the building of culturally inclusive nationhood.

LAMP isn't just a program designed to make sure local governments are consulting with diverse groups in the community, nor even to ensure they are engaging with them. Neither is it just a program designed to make sure that local government services are accessible to culturally and linguistically diverse communities, although all these things are certainly part of it.

LAMP is more about this notion of shifting diversity from the edge to the centre. It is more about the notion that the real approach to multicultural community engagement is to embrace diversity, not at arms length but into our very hearts, not as something that is negotiated with on the edge of the real life of the community. It is the real life of the community.

In fact, LAMP says that effective and appropriate engagement with cultural diversity is only possible when it is housed in this broader concept of inclusive community building. This approach has three key implications that drive the vision and some, at least, of the practice of LAMP.

Firstly, if multicultural community engagement means sustaining inclusive communities, then our communities need to be places where no group of people is locked out from opportunity because of their background, and not just to be engaged but to participate fully in and benefit from any and all aspects of community life, including its cultural, social and political life. And certainly not locked out by prejudice or deliberate discrimination. But not locked out either by what Professor Charles Husband describes as good people doing good things in the service of long established but never challenged practice.

Working to overcome these barriers is critical because they can create exclusion and if such exclusion takes root, its not just unfair and damaging to the individuals on the receiving end, it risks systemic damage to the whole.

If exclusion of individuals ends up resulting in the exclusion of groups, it risks the creation of intergenerationally transmitted disadvantage which, when correlated with ethnic or religious group identity, is a recipe in the first instance for injustice, and as such, is already unacceptable. It is also a recipe for the isolation and marginalisation of groups, and from here it requires the addition of very few extra ingredients for it to be a recipe for grievance against the whole community. This is not just unacceptable, it is down right dangerous both to the wellbeing of the victims of that injustice and to the wellbeing of the community as a whole.

So the first implication of a multicultural community engagement strategy that is more than accepting and engaging with diversity on the edge of our community, but is actually about embracing diversity at the heart of our community, remains first and foremost equality of opportunity.

This, in practical terms, means programs and planning that ensure services are accessible, are communicated effectively, that open up access to education, training and employment. It means being able to look at indicators of opportunity such as home ownership, employment, retention rates in schools, participation rates in tertiary education and so on, and to have them show no great disparity between one ethnically or religiously affiliated group and another. At the same time, however, can I say that equality of opportunity is not enough?

There is a second implication of moving diversity from the edge to the centre, which must go hand in hand with the first. That is what Professor Ghasan Hage describes as the multiculturalism of interaction. Our communities need to be places not just where diverse groups can get ahead, not just places where strong, self-identified, successful communities live with each other side by side without ever meeting or getting to know each other.

Some might say that equality of opportunity is enough, that it is a fairly successful thing to have achieved. You are okay and I am okay. This is not sufficient. While you can't have a genuinely inclusive community without equality of opportunity, it is still not enough for a community to be considered inclusive. You need interaction and communication between groups for that to occur.

Inclusive community building envisages our communities as being places where interaction and communication between diverse groups is so intertwined, so regular and so interconnected that those who, from time to time might emerge to preach intercommunal hatred, will have absolutely no fertile ground for their message to grow in. They will be met instead with a community that knows its friends, neighbours, workmates, partners and children are all part of the very diversity that the purveyors of intolerance find so threatening. This is the critical importance of moving diversity from the edge to the centre.

If diversity is something that is negotiated with, engaged with on the edge of community life and on the edge of government business, it remains imaginable how groups within the community may become targeted as scapegoats or isolated if the broader community becomes gripped by the winds of fear. However, if diversity is at the heart of our community life then everyone knows that discrimination against anyone, by anyone, for whatever reason is just not on.

This vision is undoubtedly challenged at the moment by overseas events as incomprehension in the face of terrorism can threaten to turn communities against each other, or sensing a climate of siege can cause some groups to withdraw from visible participation in community life. But it is constantly challenged anyway, even in calmer times, by the ongoing resilience of racism.

Part of the remedy for that is to build communities that are so interlinked and so engaged with each other that they will be imbued with an even greater resilience — resilience against hatred and intolerance. In practical terms this can be worked towards in many ways. Just one obvious and useful example is:

- Cultural festivals, events, and artistic and cultural development that celebrate, showcase and explore the cultural life of diverse groups in our community and of how people from all groups are making new meaning in the Australian context. Also, how they are forging new identities and new forms of cultural and cross-cultural expression from the interplay of cultures, not as a diasporic longing for another homeland but as celebration of Australian homeland. And not as fossilised and folkloristic expectations imposed by others, but as living, breathing expressions of whatever it is that people choose to be.

The multiculturalism of interaction means freeing ourselves from the safety and limitations of ethnic stereotypes and embracing the complexity and excitement of cultural life as it is really lived by people who are meeting, mixing and interacting; not erecting safety barriers but boldly crossing the borders of ethnic group affiliation to create new meanings and new layers of identity as they go.

The third implication of bringing diversity from the edge to the centre is the development of inclusive institutions to serve and lead the inclusive community. This means our institutions moving to view multiculturalism not as the business they do with that segment of the community that gets to be defined as culturally and linguistically diverse, but as the way they do all their business.

In practical terms this means integrating the principles and practices of multiculturalism into the core business of our institutions and into corporate and strategic planning, recruiting workforces that broadly reflect the make up the community they serve and developing cross-cultural competence in those workforces. In the context of all that has been said before and not in isolation from any of it, it also means developing engagement and consultation practices that link institutions closely with the culturally diverse communities they serve.

These broad approaches and parameters are clearly ambitious but they were developed in conjunction with local governments participating in the LAMP program. This of course does not mean that the program has achieved all these things, nor indeed that there is even universal implementation of strategies across the program that are aimed at achieving these things.

There are many barriers that loom large between local governments and their engagement with cultural diversity in their communities, and that loom even larger between their engagement with and incorporation of the notions of multiculturalism and culturally inclusive community building into the very core of their activity

I will briefly outline four of these barriers. Firstly, there is the whole basket of barriers that multiculturalism and the LAMP program specifically exist to try to address. For example, language and cultural barriers can and do hinder access to services for some groups in the community, and they can and do hinder the ability of local government staff to be able to respond to the requests for information and service or the barriers caused by the lack of knowledge about the needs of communities and by the very processes used to find out.

Far from being responsive, the processes of identifying community need can sometimes be solidified into responding to historical precedent rather than emerging realities thus allocating the communities scarce resources to areas where it may not be most needed. These kinds of challenges are well known to all who work in the area of promoting multiculturalism. Many of Queensland's local governments are also more aware of these barriers these days and are, in many instances, working to address them.

Secondly, there is the barrier created by the historical assumptions about the role of local government. In Queensland, local government has historically been responsible for the community's 'hard' infrastructure; roads, rates and rubbish is the often-repeated formula.

The shift for local governments to take on and resource responsibility for the so-called 'soft' issues of community development and community building has been embraced with varying degrees of enthusiasm.

Thirdly, there is the barrier caused by notions of jurisdiction and perceived cost shifting between the spheres of government. Local government is cautious about accepting responsibility for issues it regards as a state or commonwealth responsibility without a corresponding transferral of resources, and it has been the case that some in local government have argued that

multiculturalism is a policy agenda of the state. Therefore, it should be fully resourced by the state if local government is required to be involved.

Finally, the biggest barrier of all is that, even when embraced, multiculturalism itself is frequently misunderstood. Multiculturalism, even understood simply as communication with cultural diversity on the edge of the main business, may be seen as part of the soft work that is nice to do once you do the rest. Perhaps it is accepted at the level of communication and consultation with diversity on the edge, but not yet fully embraced at the level of implementing the significant cultural and structural shifts within institutions and community perceptions that are envisaged in an approach that aims at inclusive community building with diversity, not out on the edge, but front and centre.

LAMP has worked to overcome these barriers with both success and failure. It has developed a whole range of locally owned and implemented policies, plans and projects that address the cultural and linguistic barriers impacting on service delivery. This promotes a broader acceptance of diversity in the community and provides opportunities for interaction.

It has tried to embed itself into the hard business of council as much as the so-called soft business, it has mostly overcome the traditional cost shifting disputes by working as a partnership between the spheres of government, and it has worked to overcome the misunderstanding of multiculturalism, not by imposing legislative regimes (which probably wouldn't help anyway), but by working developmentally over time to build consensus, understanding and support.

It has also been developing and supporting a growing local government knowledge base and expertise that was not there in the past, but which local government can now call on to adopt, adapt, learn from and to sustain their ongoing journey in moving the business of diversity, more and more away from the edge of local government life and closer and closer to its centre.

For those who want to know more about this knowledge base and to see the kinds of things that LAMP does on the ground there is another paper at this conference presented by my colleagues Lindy Drew, Jeremy Liyanage and Deevah Melendez Morales. Alternatively, you can visit the Local Government Association of Queensland website <<http://www.lgaq.asn.au/portal/dt>>, click on community and then on cultural diversity. This will give you a view of the local policies, planning and projects that have given practical life and legs to the LAMP vision.

This vision is, of course, far from universal realisation, but through LAMP the journey of moving diversity from being relatively insignificant several years ago to being closer to the very centre of local government business has certainly begun.