

## **Building Partnerships to Promote Economic and Social Wellbeing and Learning**

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### **Abstract**

The PASCAL Observatory was established jointly by RMIT and Stirling universities and related regional governments in Victoria and the United Kingdom, following the OECD Conference on Learning Regions conducted in Melbourne in October 2002. The Observatory is focussed on sharing research and related evidence on the development and implementation of policies that improve the quality of living and working circumstances at local and regional levels, recognising the importance of social capital and the necessity of partnership for the successful implementation of policy.

PASCAL focuses on regional initiatives, particularly those which explicitly embrace learning. This provides a framework for developing a systematic planning framework that may encompass administrative, cultural, geographical, physical and/or political perspectives. It involves looking at life from the perspective of people and places, rather than separate programs delivered for them. Other partners from Europe and North America are in the process of joining PASCAL and extending the collaboration between researchers and policy-makers to a wider international environment.

While the observatory is itself an example of an innovative partnership supporting community engagement, it has supported and generated a number of research initiatives that address various aspects of partnership formation. These projects have encompassed issues related to measurement of social capital, urban regeneration, learning and innovation in urban networks, schooling and social capital, informal and formal networks and community strengthening, and the implications of different kinds of public–private partnerships.

This paper outlines some of the emerging findings from the research program with which PASCAL is associated, offering a brief overview of three projects. The analysis suggests that partnerships will not deliver effective outcomes just because they involve collaboration. However, this research offers theoretical and empirical insights into strategies that are likely to enable partnerships to operate effectively, and contribute positively to promoting economic and social wellbeing and learning.

### **PASCAL and social priorities**

Over the past decade, governments throughout all parts of the world have been preoccupied with issues related to the global economy and its implications for international relations. In this context, many governments have given priority to policies that promote enhanced international competitiveness for businesses and contain the role of the public sector, while protecting national

interests. At the same time, governments have been subject to rising expectations with respect to demands for improved infrastructure for health, education and other community services. These demands have intensified as the emerging patterns of global economic activity have led to increasing differentiation in the circumstances of communities, and particularly between metropolitan and rural and regional communities.

While 'globalisation' is blamed for many ills, national government policies have important implications for 'social capital' initiatives in communities. Macroeconomic policies, taxation and income redistribution, communications and border security are just a few examples of the ways in which national decisions shape local and regional circumstances (Mowbray 2004).

Historically many governments have tended to view society as a single entity where national policies for education, health and social development can be promulgated for the whole nation. More recently, many governments have come to see the need for more local solutions, both to engage local energies more effectively and to acknowledge and respond to the diversity of settings and needs. However, these initiatives are still constrained by the framework of policy and resourcing which is established at the national level.

Linked with these developments, many people have come increasingly to identify with their local community, and to see their local relationships as an important foundation for economic, social and cultural action. While not a new phenomenon, community-based initiatives and connections have become a critical site for the expression of people's needs and aspirations, and for the practical development of economic, education, cultural and environmental projects. Conversely, 'community engagement' has been of increasing interest to governments, as a means of both refining and delivering social policy initiatives (Parkin 2005).

The interaction of these trends has meant that governments have shown growing interest in interventions targeted at communities and regions. Social inclusion is an emerging policy imperative alongside competitive economic development. In some cases, the interventions have relied on the development or renewal of physical infrastructure, such as hospitals. Increasingly, however, the interventions have addressed challenges associated with locally-based social infrastructure and relationships, often articulated in terms of 'community building', enhancing 'social capital' or developing 'learning communities or regions' (Cavaye 2004; Faris 2004). Others have focussed on linking economic initiatives directly with social objectives. Partnerships have been an important mechanism for these interventions, involving various mixes of public sector, private/commercial interests, and community-based non-profit organisations. There is evidence which points still to the need for more devolved policy development and decision-making.

The scale and importance of these interventions raises significant questions about policy and program development: What kinds of interventions work most effectively in achieving which goals? What are the implications of different kinds of partnerships for the effectiveness of various interventions? Are different kinds of interventions more appropriate for influencing some social or economic objectives rather than others? What lessons can be learned about the effectiveness of initiatives that have both economic and social objectives? (Mowbray 2004; Healy 2005).

The range of concepts which might be applied is in itself problematic. For example, the concept of 'social capital' may be seen as quite restricted as it concentrates on issues of social cohesiveness (and the associated ideas of 'community' and general well-being) rather than the structural dimensions of social and economic life, which drive not only the approach to economic development, but also the underlying processes which produce inequality. Other broad concepts, such as regeneration and sustainability, are hard to define precisely, particularly when they have become debased through excessive and inappropriate use. For example, regeneration is considered by some to mean investment of resources into an existing rundown inner city area but can be used by others to mean the expansion of the city into the surrounding green space, whilst leaving the inner city untouched.

'Community' can be a fragile notion, such that community building is not a process which can be implemented as fiat by government. It requires careful engagement with key stakeholders, and a commitment to clear and accepted ground rules for participation and for 'belonging'. This goes beyond the broad willingness of letting people have their say, to providing clear frameworks for decision-making for resource allocation and for exploring and consolidating relationships that have substance, openness and transparency.

These issues have been recognised by the regional governments involved as founding partners in the PASCAL initiative. Kent County Council (McDonald et al. 2005), the Scottish Executive (n.d.) and the Victorian Government (DVC 2005a) have sponsored initiatives that engage a range of stakeholders and address a range of objectives encompassing health, social development, environmental stewardship and economic development. In Victoria, the mode of implementation has encompassed several different structural forms. In some initiatives, the regional government has sought to engage relatively informal local constituencies brought together for the purpose of the new initiatives, whereas others have been linked clearly with established governance processes, including local government.

For example, the Community Building Initiative has supported a particular kind of infrastructure and strategies. The emphasis on information sharing and partnerships is more than just about sharing resources, as it recognises the fundamental importance of learning. Learning for project participants, but also in bringing new ideas and energy to communities, which allow them to build on local experience and extend their activities in new directions. The initiative recognises also that government

endorsement and encouragement is not enough; there needs to be an infrastructure to sustain and expand community action, and to support specific skill development.

Concepts associated with learning economies and societies are not new; however the acknowledgment of a link between lifelong learning and social/physical infrastructure is a relatively new phenomenon. In the development of national and regional policies for investment, governments are giving greater consideration to an integrated approach with the public provision of education facilities, transport, housing, communications, health care and the role of an enlightened private sector, which may invest significantly more than the public sector if the investment climate created by governments is encouraging. It is important to discover what forms of partnership, linkage and co-investment work best in which circumstances, and are most effective at engaging with and enhancing constructive social outcomes (Walters 2005; Faris 2004).

### **Research supported by PASCAL**

As a strategic information tracking service, PASCAL has devoted resources to bringing together a substantial database of research on social capital, learning regions and place management. As well, researchers associated with PASCAL have participated in and supported research projects that offer opportunities to explore some of the emerging issues about how governments can intervene to promote social objectives, not least through supporting community engagement initiatives. Three of these initiatives are discussed in this section. These 'cases' represent initiatives that:

- support an integrated understanding of and movement towards improving social outcomes, in balance with economic agendas
- show how learning is integral to improving people's living and working conditions
- explore the potential of multifaceted initiatives that are focussed on particular places, typically, but not exclusively, neighbourhoods
- illustrate the importance of partnerships of different kinds.

### **Raploch Urban Regeneration (Scotland)**

There is urban regeneration in an area of Stirling very close to the university and the historic monuments of Stirling city situated in the heart of Scotland's central belt. Raploch has a proud community with strength of spirit derived from times gone by. However, while the wider area of Stirling has witnessed a significant increase in economic activity and prosperity in recent years, Raploch has been unable to share in this prosperity. Raploch has become an increasingly excluded community, and the gap between it and the rest of Stirling is stark.

The Raploch story is one of higher unemployment rates, poorer health, poorer quality housing, lower educational achievement and a lack of choice and opportunity. For this reason it was designated with Urban Regeneration pathfinder status by the Scottish Executive in June 2004. The proposals for its future focus on five strategic objectives: Property, Place, Partnership, Prospects and People. It is through a balanced and integrated approach that the vision of a 21st century community is being

pursued, delivered and sustained for this and future generations in Raploch. A number of initiatives form part of the radical program of change in this community. One such concept being developed is the Home Zone. A Home Zone is a street or a group of streets where the road space is shared between drivers of motor vehicles, and other road users, so that the needs of pedestrians, cyclists and children playing are taken into account in the way that the streets are designed and used.

The process of decision-making that takes place involving the residents (including the children) in the design and planning is critical. The Raploch Regeneration Group, a community forum organisation, plays a crucial role in the project. The group, along with Stirling Council, Communities Scotland and Scottish Enterprise for Forth Valley, have established the Raploch Urban Regeneration Company, a not-for-profit company limited by guarantee. Any surpluses made will be reinvested in Raploch for wider community benefit. The Raploch URC is responsible for implementing the regeneration of Raploch. It will do this by engaging the community, coordinating priorities and spending in the area, by securing funding, procuring the services of a private sector partner and, where necessary, leading on the delivery of key projects.

The project is still in the early stages, but its commitment to community involvement is reinforced by the interest being shown in it by a wide range of local organisations and businesses prepared to invest time and money. In addition, the URC has sought and secured interest from a number of departments in the local University of Stirling, including the Institute of Education, for participation in wider research to inform the project. Both parties realise that partnership brings further opportunities to secure further funding for mutual benefit. Although in their infancy, these developing relationships also provide an opportunity to construct a modus operandi for knowledge transfer on the process of regeneration using a reciprocal and collaborative, rather than hierarchical, model. One outcome of this relationship is the involvement of the URC in an international conference to be conducted by PASCAL on place management, social capital and lifelong learning at the University of Stirling, in October 2005.

### **The Drugs Round Table in St Kilda (Australia)**

In association with the European-funded CRITICAL project, a research team based at RMIT has conducted four case studies of different kinds of organisational networks in the Melbourne city region to examine the extent to which learning occurred in the networks, and its implications for innovation. One of these case studies was focussed on networks that produced, and were influenced by, the Drugs Round Table in the City of Port Phillip, an inner city municipality in Melbourne (Wilson 2005; a full report on this case study will be published as part of the final reporting processes of the CRITICAL project in 2006).

In 2000, the Victorian Drug Policy Expert Committee proposed that the five 'hotspots' of illicit drug activity, including the City of Port Phillip, should receive specific government funds to ameliorate the significant human consequences of drug use. The City of Port Phillip responded quite differently from

the other areas. Rather than establish a fixed-site primary health care facility, as occurred in the other 'hot spots', it was proposed that local agencies work together to implement the objectives of the government's policy in a decentralised and shared way.

In taking this approach, the council drew on experience gathered over the previous decade, prompted initially by what was known as the St Kilda Project, or the 'Healthy and Safe City' project, which had focussed on the development of a Public Health Plan. This had been driven by a remarkable community development worker at the council, who had actively fostered new kinds of partnerships involving not only residents and community organisations, but also businesses and representatives of people typically excluded from formal public processes. People who had typically taken quite conflicting positions on most local issues began to understand each other's perspectives more clearly and to develop a level of mutual respect. As a result, quite innovative services had emerged. For example, health agencies had cooperated with each other and with the owners of private businesses in providing, for example, outreach services to people with psychiatric disability (and, often, drug and alcohol problems) living in rooming houses. Needle exchange facilities had been established around this time, and local agencies had worked for some time to enable injecting users to do so in a relatively safer environment.

Notwithstanding the appreciation of this history, the injection of 'hot spot' funding created a significant political problem. A conservative Victorian Government had reshaped radically the structure of local government and non-government community services through the introduction of competitive tendering. Local health and community organisations that had begun to build strong cooperative relationships suddenly found themselves having to compete with each other for the resources they needed to continue delivering services, or else find themselves going out of existence. For many workers, this was a difficult time, personally, politically and professionally.

Hence, the prospect that the new 'hot spot' funding could be divisive was very real. Following the experience of, and drawing on relationships which had grown through the St Kilda Project, the Director of Community Services at the newly-formed local government authority was strongly committed to the principles of cooperative responses to these issues. She brought together people who would otherwise see themselves quite at odds with each other (including local residents with families, local traders, service providers, drug users and sex workers). This underlying philosophy became a critical dimension of the way in which the Local Drug Strategy was implemented. The Drugs Round Table (DRT) was convened in early 2001 and became the key focus of the efforts to sustain cooperative relationships, and to bring local agencies and other key stakeholders together.

The DRT was complemented by the Drugs and Community Partnership Forum, a larger and more diffuse network that aimed to encourage ongoing dialogue and community education, fostering creative problem-solving and enhancing positive working relationships amongst various stakeholders. Approximately 80 agencies and community organisations were contacted, initially seeking their

involvement with the forum. It met for the first time in June 2001 and began by engaging participants actively in questions about what would make the group worthwhile for them. This ongoing process of reflection and reorientation became an important characteristic of the forum. At least 30 and up to 100 people attended forum activities. Some members participated also in the Community Education Action Group.

A major disruption of the network occurred in 2003–04. This partly reflected the consolidation of decisions made in the early years, then confounded by state government intervention, which required the establishment of a fixed-site primary care facility to meet the needs of street-based injecting drug users. At this stage, there was considerable disquiet within the DRT, and an intensely political process unfolded, as different organisations quickly understood the consequences for programs which they had been operating. This was a particularly unpleasant and difficult phase in the relationships. Under the influence of the council, considerable emphasis was put on continuing to use the formal structures and processes to negotiate an acceptable outcome.

Hence, the network involved relatively formal structures, complemented by both a history and continuing informal relationships amongst many of the key stakeholders. Some of the agencies have been working in this area for decades, and the quality of relationships fostered in the early 1990s has proved to be very important, notwithstanding the advent of somewhat artificial marketisation of the provision of community and health services which have put some of the agencies in direct competition with each other. Some of these agencies are now very large, while others are still small, providing very specific services.

The network sponsored a broad range of activities, some of which were relatively local and focussed on specific groups. Others addressed planning and infrastructure issues, while yet others sought to shift the whole climate of relationships around drug use in the municipality.

Some people had little more direct contact than attending meetings of the forum, or being part of the audience for performances and exhibitions. Even for some of those people, they acknowledged being moved profoundly by some of the experience, with a significant shift in their perspectives on members of the vulnerable groups or on some of the associated issues. Others found that the interactions within the network became a crucial resource shaping the way that services were approached. Interorganisational networking became entwined deeply with interpersonal relationships. The symbolic aspects of sharing food is one important manifestation of the quality of relationships that was engendered.

Performance activities and festivals especially engendered a very strong intensity. However, those situations which brought together people around key issues (such as tolerance zones) also provoked deep feelings and very 'robust' engagement. It seems that, for the most part, these more vigorous engagements were handled constructively. Whether it was a debate at a forum, a DRT meeting, a

reserve 'design-in' or preparation for a performance, there was an underlying recognition of the importance of respecting different viewpoints, listening to each other, and of sustaining relationships. Funding decisions, in particular, excited considerable anger, and people demonstrated some sensitivity in trying to remain connected. In all of this, the role of staff at the local government authority has been pivotal.

For some of the people close to the heart of the network, their approach was informed clearly by a particular theoretical perspective; an understanding of the dynamics in which they were engaged, and of the social forces into which they were seeking to intervene, which gave them a perspective which well beyond the immediacy of whatever subject matter was at hand. For example, a key council figure was very interested in contests around 'place', and of the significance of class and gender, social inclusion/exclusion in shaping the ways in which particular interests were expressed, and certain practices proposed or opposed. Others brought a feminist perspective to bear, while yet others acknowledged the significance of cultural development theories in shaping the ways in which they made sense of what was happening.

### **Loch Lomond and the Trossachs National Park (Scotland)**

Scotland's first national park was designated in 2002 with some of the most stunningly beautiful scenery in Europe. It is one of Scotland's greatest assets. Importantly it has four key statutory objectives:

- To conserve and enhance the natural and cultural heritage of the area
- To promote sustainable use of the natural resources of the area
- To promote understanding and enjoyment of the special qualities of the area by the public
- To promote sustainable economic and social development of the area's communities.

The national park provides examples of economic and social developments that have been achieved through partnerships, with communities taking charge and tackling local development issues. The national park authority pioneered the Community Futures Initiative working with each of the 24 communities. This was facilitated by Small Town and Rural Development (STAR).

The most northern part of the national park is known as Breadalbane where there are several communities who have progressed some exciting community enterprises. The Scottish Land Fund (SLF) is a government funding scheme that provides assistance in community land ownership. This enables development to be tailored to local needs, providing tangible social, environmental or economic benefits and addresses local disadvantage. With support from the SLF, The Killin Care Trust purchased the residential home from a private owner when it came up for sale in 2002 and it now provides care for up to 12 elderly people. With the nearest care provider being 23 miles away, the community was determined to keep this essential local asset and its elderly residents in the village. It is now owned and run by the Killin community.

In the north west of the park, the Strathfillan Community Development Trust (SCDT) is described “like a community bus — a vehicle that local people can get on to drive to individual project destinations. Often we have partners who we invite on the bus journey with us; sometimes the community is alone”. It has planted two community woodlands, with a network of paths, designed and built a play park; bought, renovated and rented out four houses; employed development managers, and funded its office. Tyndrum Community Woodland occupies 90 hectares of burned plantation replanted with Caledonian pine and native broadleaves. Management is through a long-term lease from Forest Enterprise. The key aim is to encourage visitors to linger longer and support the local economy. The SCDT has also set up the Strathfillan Action Group, which organises social events, evening classes and activities for older people; for example, a pensioners luncheon club. The Strathfillan Virtual Learning Centre has been funded through the LEADER+ initiative and provides access to information and communication technology (ICT) facilities and training to the communities of this remote part of the national park. These communities suffer particularly poor public transport links and minimal adult education provision.

Other examples of community enterprise include The Pit Stop Diner across from the upper reaches of Loch Lomond in Arrochar at the head of the sea loch — Loch Long. The Pit Stop Diner is a community-owned enterprise purchased in 2004 with funding from The Scottish Land Fund, Scottish Enterprise and Social Investment Scotland. Income from the business is used to support local initiatives.

University involvement and 'knowledge transfer' has been ongoing, albeit on an informal and ad hoc basis, sometimes reflecting other responsibilities. For example, one of the National Park Authority Board members, an experienced researcher in education and in regeneration and sustainability has been involved in community partnership work, alongside work on the Natural and Cultural Heritage Resources Committee.

### **Forming partnerships**

The development of effective partnerships, as a key driver for encouraging and structuring community engagement, has emerged as a key element in each of these projects. This section explores a range of issues about the character and importance of partnerships in mediating community engagement, as a means of fostering both economic and social wellbeing.

In examining issues related to partnerships, it can be helpful to reflect on Scandinavian experience with partnerships in fostering organisational development. This experience has been useful, as local researchers have reflected carefully on the issues which arose in partnership formation, and have found the democratic dialogue' approach to be particularly useful (Gustavsen et al. 2001).

Drawing on Habermas' theories about communication and rationality, the researchers placed particular emphasis on the significance of conversation in the formation of partnerships.

### **Why a priority on partnership formation?**

At one simple level, it is a resource issue. In a climate where there are simply insufficient resources to address needs, partnerships can serve to facilitate more effective use of the resources which are available, both funding and expertise, and to use those resources to leverage others.

However, the case studies indicate clearly that the use of partnerships can add significantly to the quality of relationships and to the social outcomes for people in a locality, especially where those partnerships involve organisations which have a broader view of social processes. The benefits are reflected both in an enhanced sense of belonging in the locality, but also in tangible outcomes.

This is not to suggest that partnerships are necessarily effective. Nor should it imply that they are always congenial. The case studies indicate that even in partnerships that are seen, over time, to deliver significant benefits, there are times where divisive issues can threaten the continued commitment of various partners, and undermine the quality of the operational relationships. This raises questions about the conditions under which partnership formation can be seen to be desirable.

### **Conditions for effective partnership formation**

From the research undertaken to date by the PASCAL partners, it would seem that the following conditions are important not only in developing partnerships, but in sustaining them:

- a) *Clarity of outcomes.* In most circumstances, potential partners will have diverse objectives which they are seeking to achieve. This in itself is not surprising, nor unreasonable. Especially when public agencies are seeking private sector partners, whether as providers, investors or as collaborators, the scope for divergence is constantly present — similarly, perhaps, where a small community organisation is becoming involved in cooperation with a much larger organisation. In these cases, explicit understanding by the outcomes that are sought from the initiative is fundamental, both to inspire the partners, and to provide a stable ground from which tensions can be addressed.
- b) *Agreed and maintained governance arrangements.* Governance does not necessarily require a dominant superstructure to provide stability to a project. However, it is important that there is a clear and shared understanding about the ways in which decisions will be made about different aspects of the initiative, and where accountability lies for maintaining the agreed processes. The three case studies offer three quite distinct approaches to handling governance issues:
  - (i) The partners established a not-for-profit company
  - (ii) A ‘roundtable’ was established, largely informal, but granted significant legitimacy by the partners, underpinned by local government
  - (iii) Existing governance arrangements were appropriate.
- c) *Effective approach to conflict resolution.* Conflict is an inevitable dimension of human initiatives, and affects the trajectories of many partnerships. Conflicts arise for many different reasons; the issue is not so much the reason, but the underlying implications for the partnership, and how they

are handled. While linked to governance, it is apparent that conflict will test many governance arrangements, and that particular care can be required to ensure that serious differences can offer an opportunity for learning. Effective processes reflect not only proper attention to clarification of perspectives, issues and of evidence, but rely also on an underlying acknowledgement of goodwill on all sides, an expectation that the respect and reciprocity necessary for partnership can be sustained despite the conflict.

- d) Clarity about the *specific character of the contribution* that particular partners are making. This implies careful planning to ascertain the principal resources required for the initiative, and explicit negotiation to clarify the allocation of accountabilities, or at least to determine the processes through which these will be resolved.

### **Universities (knowledge centres) and partnerships**

Many initiatives designed to deliver on social priorities include an explicit commitment to fostering learning, both as a part of the initiative in itself and as a means of sharing competence and building self-reliance. The role of formal 'knowledge centres', such as universities and research centres, in supporting this learning can be important. However, at this stage, the case studies reflect limited understanding of how university involvement can be best structured to maximise access to acknowledged expertise and to provide ongoing support to facilitate learning within the project.

The difficulty in the projects that have served as the focus of these case studies, however, is the number of stakeholders with whom the university must develop and sustain a relationship. This can be demanding, especially where resources are limited, and where the university environment, in itself, encourages an inwardly-focussed framework of operations.

In these case studies, the range of examples has included the individual researchers whose personal research interests happen to coincide with an initiative, and those where a university department has established a formal relationship with the partnership. In the latter case, multiple projects are underway, with funding from both the partners and independent sources. In most cases, the relationship was valued by partnership members, partly for the specific expertise that was offered, but also for the insights from the external perspective on the project itself, which the researcher(s) inevitably brought with them.

An important implication of these projects is that initiatives to achieve important social priorities should be framed to incorporate universities or other knowledge centres. This is partly because their expertise is an important public resource, and also because their involvement can help to build an ongoing commitment to learning. Joint initiatives of this kind can create qualitatively more effective operations. These can in turn be more attractive to funding agencies as they are more likely to deliver both benefits for general knowledge generation, as well as assisting with the practical application of lessons learned from that research.

## Conclusion

Many of the issues which have emerged in this paper and in the associated analysis further investigation. The PASCAL Observatory provides a framework for bringing together insights from a range of research initiatives, and testing their findings through dialogue with policy-makers from regional governments throughout the world. Developing a better understanding of the potential of various kinds of partnerships remains a key objective of the observatory in the next phase of its development.

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