

Magical thinking:
The rise of the
community participation model

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The predominance of neo-liberal economics in western democracies in recent years and the accompanying antipathy towards “big government” has been accompanied by the growth in community-based approaches to addressing social and environmental problems. “Grass-roots”, community action has been increasingly embraced as a politically attractive approach to the delivery of public good programs. While there is increasing cynicism about governments’ capacity to deliver solutions, there appears to be a growing belief in the almost mystical qualities of communities as entities with the wherewithal to solve complex social, economic and environmental problems. This has manifested itself in the ubiquitous development of government programs relying on collective action by the so-called “third sector” – voluntary organisations and communities. These include those aimed at the design and/or delivery of government programs and services and other public goods. Collective action solutions emerged at the end of the twentieth century and were embraced as a means to deliver public goods without large scale government involvement. They have been used to fill the gaps left by the market and the hollowing out of Government. However, this incarnation of community action mirrored the adoption of these types of policy approaches in other eras and other ideological contexts. Linked to enthusiasm for “bottom-up” approaches is a fairly heroic belief in empowerment and the building of social capital and community capacity as effective mechanisms for solving all manner of social problems.

One of the participants in Kingdon’s seminal study of the policy process referred to the recycling of old policy ideas as “resurrecting old dead dogs, sprucing them up, and floating them up to the top”¹. While we find the imagery of Kingdon’s dead dog interesting, albeit unattractive, it infers that policy-makers are aware that the animal is dead. We prefer to think of the current policy-makers’ faith in community as akin to a child’s “magical thinking”² because it implies a child-like belief in the efficacy of the policy solution and failure to apply the same critical, evidence-based assessment to community as is applied to government. In other words, policy-makers accept the concepts of government failure and market failure but apparently ignore the risks of community failure and the limits to collective action. This failure to take a well reasoned, evidence-based approach to the uses and limits of community-based and collective action

programs means that they are likely to be less well designed and applied than they may otherwise have been.

This paper sets out to describe the community participation model and some of its historic and more recent manifestations. We then discuss some of the possible pitfalls of the adoption of the model in the absence of policy learning. Finally, we argue that the model need not be abandoned but that a more thoughtful and reasoned approach be taken to policy based on community participation.

The community participation model and the rise of the third sector

In recent years, there has been an increase in the number of policies and programs advocating partnerships between government and community or voluntary groups to solve a wide range of problems. Although voluntary organisations or non-profit organisations have always been an important human services delivery mechanism in developed countries, this recent surge of popularity extends the participation of the voluntary sector to a more extensive range of issues and a wider range of groups. These programs address issues as varied as regional economic development; family functioning; education and schooling; childcare; health issues and problems; substance abuse; crime control and prevention; biodiversity; natural resource management; and rural and urban revitalisation and renewal. They involve a range of activities from participation in planning and visioning exercises to service delivery to community-based and collective action to resolve specific problems. They may involve partnerships between government and a single community or voluntary group or may require coalitions and collaborations between a number of diverse community and interest groups. They may be focused on a single issue or problem, for example asthma – or may aim to tackle a broad range of problems for example, the range of factors contributing to the social, economic and environmental sustainability of a geographic region.

Programs focussed on community or voluntary organisation participation are often ascribed a number of virtues. It is argued that:

- ‘top down’ approaches through which government and other experts have identified and imposed solutions have failed in the past to resolve these intractable problems;

- the relevant community or organisation has a better knowledge of the problem and workable solutions so the problem will be solved;
- involving the community will mobilise many more human resources than could be marshalled by government acting alone;
- participative programs will build the capacity of the participators to tackle any future problems on their own – they will become self-reliant; and
- involving the affected population in deciding their future is a good thing in itself and is a more popular policy approach.

In the United Kingdom, the Blair Government's New Labor implemented an unprecedented Compact between the Government and the 'Third Sector' in 1998. The Compact was an explicit recognition that the private and public sectors alone could not address social issues and that the missing element was the voluntary or third sector. The origins of the policy debate about the role of the voluntary sector in dealing with social policy issues predate the Blair Government. However, the importance placed on partnerships with the voluntary sector in Tony Blair's 1998 pamphlet "The Third Way: New politics for the new century" and the implementation of the Compact and an array of other initiatives indicate the pre-eminence given to this policy model in the UK under the Labor Government³.

Similarly, the huge increase in the United States of community coalition and partnership based programs over the last decade⁴ has seen this policy model become the most common key element of policy solutions to an array of social, economic and environmental problems⁵.

Community empowerment and action paradigms are also used widely used in community development, social welfare and environmental programs in the Third World and in eastern European countries⁶ and the European Union has a range of programs encouraging or requiring community or voluntary organisation participation⁷. The European Commission recently issued a discussion paper authored by the President and Vice President titled "The Commission and Non-Governmental Organisations: building a stronger partnership"⁸. The paper outlines the importance of working with NGOs and the wide range of policy issues and points in the policy process that would benefit from these partnerships.

In Australia too the model has been readily adopted. The National Landcare Program predated the enthusiasm for community participation in the UK and Europe and was one of the first big ticket and highly promoted national programs of this type in Australia. The

Decade of Landcare was announced in 1989 following a submission to government from the National Farmers' Federation (NFF) and the Australian Conservation Foundation (ACF) that sought a new approach and a significant increase in the funding available to address land degradation on Australia's farms. The Commonwealth Minister for Primary Industries and Energy, a major proponent of the program and in whose portfolio Landcare was located, described the Landcare program model as one

where community groups form to identify and discuss common problems, and develop solutions that they implement. The model encompasses several very important elements – local ownership of local problems and solutions, and empowerment of local communities to deal with them. The role of governments is to facilitate this process, and to provide information and technical assistance in cooperation with local groups⁹.

Semi-structured interviews with some of those key actors involved in the development of the National Landcare Program show that the community Landcare approach was seen as cutting edge for the time. It represented two new strands of thought for dealing with environmental problems – community empowerment and an integrated, holistic approach to dealing with problems that had shown limited response to the previous fragmented policies. Community empowerment met the demand for increased community 'say' in both rural issues and the resolution of environmental problems. This in turn removed the need for direct government action, which was consistent with the philosophy at the time on the role of governments. Importantly it was a cheap way of addressing a huge and growing problem that was not seen as "sexy" enough to generate a significant increase in funding. The model was essentially one of collective action, involving farmers and their communities in addressing problems which had been collectively generated and for which individual solutions would be ineffective.

Following the apparent success of the Landcare program, there has been a proliferation of programs at Commonwealth level in Australia which have adopted community-based approaches to social problems. Similar programs such as Coastcare, Dunecare and the Fisheries Action Program grew directly out of Landcare and the model has also emerged in apparently unrelated portfolios such as Family and Community Services (FACS). The FACS website advertises the *Stronger Families and Communities Strategy*, the aims of which are

to help build family and community capacity to deal with challenges and take advantage of opportunities that come along. Its focus is on early intervention and prevention approaches to help families and communities deal with issues before they become serious problems¹⁰.

This worthy, if imprecise, goal is to be met through the empowerment of communities by “promoting a ‘can do’ community spirit and helping families and communities develop support networks and the skills and resources they need to deal with their own issues, including volunteering”¹¹. The Strategy provides more supportive language along these lines but little substance. Communities are asked to develop an idea and then apply for funding: “If you have an idea that has the support of your community and that will help strengthen Australian families and communities we would like to hear from you”¹². The basis for projects under the strategy is provided by a series of linked programs which illustrates the breadth of social ills this strategy hopes to address: the Stronger Families Fund; Early Intervention, Parenting and Family Relationship Support; Potential Leaders in Local Communities; Local Solutions to Local Problems; Can do Community; and the National Skills Development for Volunteers Program.

In addition to programs in FACS, the Transport and Regional Services Portfolio has a similar community focus to programs like the Regional Solutions Program, and the Natural Heritage Trust also targets community participation. In the case of the Natural Heritage Trust, this even extends to projects for the protection of endangered species.

Although the policy makers involved in the development of the National Landcare Program believed they were developing something innovative and original, the program is similar to programs that Swanson has described as locality-based policy, which he argues dates back to the 1930s in the United States¹³. Swanson uses this term to characterise government policies which purport to involve directly and significantly local stakeholders in federal and state government policy development and program management. The community development concept was not limited to domestic issues in the US, having been a “central element of the foreign aid program from its inception”¹⁴. Community participation models have emerged previously offering alternative, “bottom up” solutions to policy problems. In the United Kingdom for example, community organisation based models of program delivery were tried in the nineteenth century¹⁵ and were popular in the late 1960s and early 1970s¹⁶. In the United States they were an important policy element in the post war New Deal and in the 1960s War on Poverty¹⁷. In the latter case, the language used was stunningly similar to the FACS promotional material outlined above. The *Community Action Program Guide*, which described the community action component of the War on Poverty, stated that “A vital feature of every community action program is the involvement of the poor themselves – the residents of the areas and members of the groups to be served – in planning, policy-making, and operation of the program”¹⁸.

Policy learning

Community participation models therefore have a history – they have been employed in different countries, at different times, in different policy areas and in different ideological contexts. The existence of this history would suggest ample opportunities for policy learning. Earlier programs have been evaluated, described and criticised and should provide a valuable source of information about the strengths and weaknesses of a particular approach. Rose has argued that in looking for policy models, “The simplest place for officials to search is their own past, in hopes of finding a program that has worked before”¹⁹. The recurrence of the community development model on a 20-30 year cycle suggests that the search process does not extend to the experience of previous generations. The magical thinking about community participation models we observe in Australia at present suggests that the enthusiasm for community participation has not been tempered by an awareness of the problems encountered by earlier incarnations of the model – in other words, policy learning does not appear to have occurred.

For the policy maker engaged in the search for a workable solution to difficult social problems, there are a number of well-known strategies available. Writers such as Lindblom, Simon and others have described processes which are designed to address the resource limitations faced by real world policy makers – these have been variously described as satisficing²⁰, bounded rationality²¹ and strategies of decision²². Borrowing models from elsewhere in the same jurisdiction, as has happened with the Landcare model, can provide such a strategy. As Rose argues, “Instead of new knowledge, policymakers prefer the assurance of doing what has worked before, or been effective elsewhere”²³. Important considerations in selecting a policy option include cost, ideological acceptability and practicality, including anticipating the reactions of important players in the policy process²⁴. Kingdon argues that successful policy ideas satisfy several criteria, “technical feasibility, value acceptance within the policy community, tolerable cost, anticipated public acquiescence, and a reasonable chance for receptivity among elected decision makers”²⁵

The community participation model currently satisfies Kingdon’s criteria for acceptance. It has passed the policy-makers’ test of surviving the Cabinet process and it is consistent with the prevailing political ideology of small government. As van Nispen and Ringeling put it, “Some tools are ‘in’, other means are ‘out’”²⁶, and at the moment the evidence suggests that community participation models are very much “in”. The model is also ideologically malleable, attracting unusual bipartisan support. Community participation can be sold to conservatives as private volunteerism that reduces the role and size of

government and to liberals as a way of reviving public support for social reform and programs²⁷ and shifting from an entitlement mentality to an approach based on empowerment. To the neoconservatives, community participation solutions can provide a cloak for a combination of antigovernment individualism and corporate imperialism.

So what lessons could be learnt from previous programs? It is important that policy makers understand the underlying policy model and appreciate its limitations. In the case of community based models, an understanding of collective action would assist policy makers in shaping their programs. For example, if the Landcare model had been designed with an understanding of how collective action works in practice it may have been even more successful than it has been to date. In 1996, the belated recognition of the importance of private benefits in motivating action led to the introduction of funding for on-ground works which had a private benefit in addition to their public benefit. This represented a fundamental shift in philosophy. However, it was pressure from farmer groups that resulted in the change of policy – it did not arise from any sudden understanding by policy-makers of the limits of collective action. As Linder and Peters argue, “It may well be that ... decision makers do not, in fact, have very complete conceptualizations of policy instruments”²⁸. In his critique of the community action component of the War on Poverty, Moynihan makes a very similar observation: “None [of the decision makers] was especially familiar with the social science theory on which the various positions were based”²⁹. The proliferation of Australian government programs requiring community action raises serious questions about the capacity of communities and volunteer organisations to absorb the increased workload. Early on, the limited number of skilled leaders in rural Australia was identified as “a fundamental constraint to Landcare”³⁰. As more Government programs require community participation, they may founder on the fact that leadership roles tend to be taken up by the “the busiest people in their community”³¹ and there is a limit to the amount of energy and resources individuals will commit to community action. Marwell and Oliver argue that “in most instances collective action is produced by a relatively small cadre of highly interested and resourceful individuals, rather than by the efforts of the “average” group member”³² and that this active sub-group provides the “critical mass needed to begin any collective action”³³. In small communities, the limited number of leaders will quickly sap the capacity for participation in community-driven development. In other words, community failure can occur.

In some areas, the types of people who participate in community based action may not be those who are best equipped to achieve the program’s outcomes. In the area of endangered species protection, the work that needs to be done can include heavy lifting, of traps for example, or extensive tracking of animal populations. These activities require

levels of physical fitness and stamina that may not characterise community groups where the volunteer base is largely made up of retirees. Younger, fitter people who may be more physically suited to the tasks that need to be undertaken often have other work and family commitments which prevent them giving the time needed to participate effectively in these activities.

Enthusiasm for community action as an avenue for addressing policy problems must be tempered by a recognition that some social problems are of such magnitude that they are beyond the capacity of individuals and communities to address without significant government support. There is a risk that policy makers are attracted to community based programs as much for their low cost as their capacity to address intractable, long-term problems. In his work in the Americas, Swanson notes that

Perhaps the most important observation is that ... [locality-based] policies are not a panacea for languishing federal and state policies, nor a charm for community empowerment³⁴.

Moynihan explains that one of the key supporters of community participation in addressing the problems of the poor in the US in the 1960s was the Bureau of the Budget. The Bureau saw these approaches as a means for achieving improved efficiency in program delivery, including getting "the most for the taxpayer's dollar"³⁵. Bureau members saw "bottom-up" program delivery as an "alluring, intoxicating possibility"³⁶.

Landcare raised the level of awareness of farming communities about the need to preserve the natural resource base on which their industries depend and the community participation model appeared to be appropriate for some of the issues it sought to tackle. However, much remains to be done to reverse the trends in land and water degradation. As Cary and Webb note, the scale and magnitude of the problem and the costs of its solution may well be beyond the capacity of a collective action based program³⁷.

Extending the model to endangered species protection also raises some questions about the appropriateness of community participation. Scientists working with endangered species are becoming frustrated by the emphasis on community participation models which do not recognise the expertise required to work with threatened populations or communities. Increasingly scientists are being frozen out of the process as Natural Heritage Trust (NHT) funding contracts preclude expenditure on salaries for skilled consultants to assist with program planning and implementation. Also NHT will fund equipment which the community group frequently lacks the skills to obtain licences to operate eg traps, radio collars etc. This problem is not limited to NHT funded projects as

many other funding sources for community groups also limit money for consultants. The community groups themselves do not always have access to the reserves in which work needs to be done nor the skills or time to engage in trapping, tagging and tracking vulnerable species. They also often lack the expertise to plan a project and apply for funding ie they know there is a problem but have no idea what to do and the programs they do implement are often piecemeal and non-strategic.

Clearly reliance on the Third Sector and communities to deliver social benefits will be as subject to problems as are the government and the market. Although the concept of voluntary failure has received some attention in the literature, much of the focus has been on the involvement of the voluntary sector as a response to market and government failure. Salamon offers a different perspective. He argues that voluntary sector involvement does not occur in response to the sub-optimal provision of collective goods by the private and public spheres, rather voluntary sector involvement occurs in response to market failure and government involvement occurs in response to voluntary failure. According to Salamon voluntary organisations have their own significant limitations that constrain their ability to respond to public problems. These failures include: *insufficiency, amateurism; particularism and paternalism*³⁸.

Insufficiency refers to resource constraints. Non-profit organisations have difficulties in accessing the resources required to address their chosen problem or issue. This may be due to the free-rider problem and/or to their inability to command resources through, for example, taxes. The regular cry from farmers involved in Landcare that “you can’t be green if you’re in the red” illustrates this point well. Some problems require significant resources – for example, redressing physical infrastructure inadequacies in remote country areas. If voluntary organisations are unable to raise the required resources, the role of government in addressing this form of voluntary failure could be to provide or facilitate access to the necessary levels of funding and other resources.

Amateurism covers a range of issues relating to the skills and competencies non-profit organisations and their participants are able to bring to bear in addressing a problem. The voluntary impulse rather than specific training to provide a good or service motivates participation. Some of the issues community and voluntary groups are being asked to address are complex and require considerable subject matter expertise – quite apart from the management and other skills required to run organisations and interact with private and public sector organisations. Although the term amateurism carries a pejorative connotation, it is worth asking whether the task expected of community and other groups is reasonable. Can a voluntary action from members of a socially and economically depressed area be expected to bring a sudden burst of posterity that has failed to occur in

response to other approaches? Can community groups realistically be expected to reverse the rate of species extinction or land degradation that has been occurring in Australia for 200 years despite decades of intensive research and effort? Is it reasonable to expect local groups to deal successfully with problems of high youth unemployment, drug and alcohol abuse, crime and violence and so on? Government can play a role in firstly determining whether the problem is appropriate for community-based solutions and secondly in providing incentives for and assistance with capacity building.

Particularism occurs where voluntary organisations or groups are constructed along religious, ethnic, geographic or other boundaries. This may lead to gaps and duplication in service provision. One regional community may be particularly well served by a number of organisations providing competing services in, for example, childcare while another community may not have any community groups operating in this way. There may, for example, be a mismatch in the location and activity of Landcare groups relative to the location of priority problems requiring this intervention. Or there may be a lack of sex education services providing advices on contraception or termination because of the religious beliefs of the available providers. The role of Government in correcting this type of failure may lie in providing information and incentives to ensure adequate coverage.

In Salamon's last category of voluntary failure, paternalism, failure occurs where groups are motivated by moral outrage rather than by concern for or an understanding of the complexities of the issue or client group they are dealing with. An example may be a program designed to assist a given disadvantaged group which starts from the assumption that group members are to blame for their status. This will result in inappropriate service design and provision. Government's role might be in supporting research and analysis and in providing incentives which encourage more appropriate groups to provide the required services.

Magical versus reasoned thinking

Although there is the potential for community failure, we do not suggest that the community participation model be rejected entirely. Rather, we suggest that policy-makers adopt a more cautious approach to the model and learn from their own experiences and those of others. May notes that "Policy instruments can be chosen for a variety of institutional or political reasons unrelated to improved understandings of the instruments"³⁹. We would suggest that developing an understanding of the underlying

policy model is an important step in developing effective policy. In the case of the community participation model, some awareness of the limits of collective action and the dynamics of groups would be a good starting point.

A second important step would be an assessment of whether the model selected is appropriate to the problem. Are communities well equipped to address dysfunctional families or protect endangered species? If there is a place for community participation or collective action, should it be the main policy instrument relied on or one of a number of policy approaches? The attraction of a simple solution to complex intractable problems is obvious but the likelihood of finding a 'magic bullet' is probably low.

Finally we urge policy makers to seek out earlier attempts at implementing similar programs and learn from their successes and failures – and not just contemporary examples, historical cases may also be useful. While accepting that policy makers are operating in an environment of resource constraints and may have very limited time in which to develop new programs, it is suggested that consulting evaluations of similar programs may be instructive in avoiding costly mistakes. Of course, the lessons will only be as good as the quality of the evaluations and will also require a willingness on the part of policy makers to accept constructive criticism. It is human nature for policy makers to become attached to programs on which they have worked long and hard but it is important to resist the temptation to be immediately defensive against unflattering evaluations as these criticisms provide real opportunities for policy learning to occur.

We can see why the community participation model is superficially attractive to policy-makers. It is ideologically appealing, it has been seen to be successful and it can be presented as a means for saving money. Politicians, policy-makers and many in the broader community have developed a healthy scepticism about the ability of governments to address intractable social problems. That critical analysis has yet to be brought to bear on the replacement approach – relying on communities to do more and more. This is magical thinking.

Community participation has its place but we argue that policy-makers run the risk of putting too much blind faith in it and not distinguishing between problems which lend themselves to this type of approach and others for which community-based approaches are simply inappropriate or are only a small part of the solution. Policy-makers select models for a variety of reasons, which may not include a complete understanding of the policy instrument being employed⁴⁰. Their appeal lies in other characteristics – such as their political and ideological appeal, low cost and technical feasibility⁴¹. If policy learning does not occur and these programs do not evolve to address problems with program

design and implementation, they are likely to go the way of the previous cycles of enthusiasm for the charm of community empowerment. These programs will be seen to have failed and will be replaced with a new wave of policy approaches – quite possibly tried and abandoned before in times before current bureaucratic corporate memory. Policy learning is an important part of the policy process and this requires a rejection of magical solutions in favour of considered analysis of the policy model being applied.

Endnotes

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