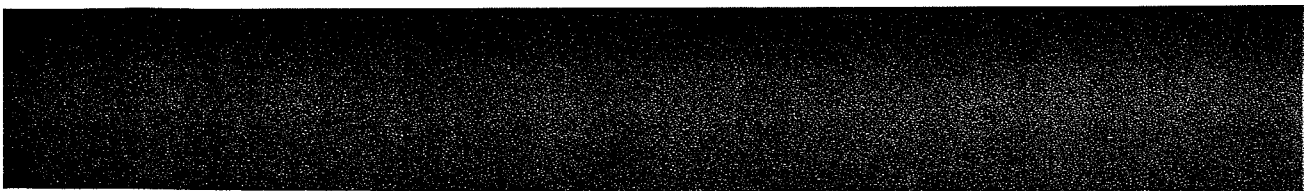




Social Capital, Lifelong Learning and the Management of Place

An international perspective

Edited by MICHAEL OSBORNE,
KATE SANKEY and BRUCE WILSON



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Michael Osborne, Kate Sankey
and Bruce Wilson

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Contents

<i>List of figures</i>	vii
<i>List of tables</i>	ix
<i>List of contributors</i>	xi
1 Introduction	1
MICHAEL OSBORNE, KATE SANKEY AND BRUCE WILSON	
2 Quantitative indicators of social capital: measurement in a complex social context	15
RALPH CATTS	
3 What <i>should</i> count as ‘evidence’ for effective ‘situated policy’?	29
IAN FALK	
4 Governance and community strengthening: a case study from Victoria, Australia	41
MICHAEL HESS AND DAVID ADAMS	
5 Community efficacy and social capital: modelling how communities deliver outcomes for members	51
SUE KILPATRICK AND JOAN ABBOTT-CHAPMAN	
6 Identity, local community and the internet	62
DUNCAN TIMMS	
7 The empirics of social capital and economic development: a critical perspective	76
FABIO SABATINI	

8 Co-operation, networks and learning regions: network analysis as a method for investigating structures of interaction	95
WOLFGANG JÜTTE	
9 Communities of practice and purpose: making knowledge work in the university industry interface	111
TONY HALL, DEIRDRE HOGAN, EAMONN MCQUADE, EMMA O'BRIEN AND RHONA SHERRY	
10 Beyond the social capital rhetoric – an investigation of the use of social networks in the co-ordination of intra-enterprise activities: a case study of small-scale rural non-farm enterprises in Zimbabwe	124
JETHRO ZUWARIMWE	
11 Lifelong learning: institutionalisation and regulating mechanisms	141
KORNELIA EFTIMOVA ILIEVA	
12 Place-centric and future-oriented learning in the local village context	161
ERIK WALLIN	
13 Cities as engines of growth	181
PATRICIA INMAN AND LARRY SWANSON	
14 Rationalising public place commodification and the ramifications of this choice in Alberta, Canada	190
THERESIA WILLIAMS	
15 'Cultural presence' and disadvantaged groups: do HEIs make a difference?	201
LESLEY DOYLE	
16 Sustainable development: the role of lifelong learning	216
CORINNE VAN BEILEN, MAX VAN DER KAMP AND JACQUES ZEELEN	
17 Conclusion	229
BRUCE WILSON, KATE SANKEY AND MIKE OSBORNE	
<i>Index</i>	237

5.1
8.1
8.2
8.3
9.1
10.1
10.2
10.3
11.1
11.2
11.3
12.1
12.2
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12.4
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12.6
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Chapter 4

Governance and community strengthening

A case study from Victoria, Australia

Michael Hess and David Adams

Introduction

From the mid-1990s and building on experiences from the community development strategies of the 1960s and 1970s, community-based approaches to policy making and implementation have been adopted in many market-oriented democracies as governments have tried new ways of addressing the complexity of their tasks. The link between governance models and the likelihood of place-focused policies succeeding in particular areas was noted as a characteristic of this trend by European commentators (Geddes and Benington 2001). More recently, Considine's review of approaches over the last decade in European countries (2004a, 2004b) identified both the wide range of differences between the approaches used and the unevenness of their success. Despite this variety, his review finds that governance factors, that is to say the ways in which the links between people and institutions are established, are constantly crucial components of success. This is especially the case in respect of how local institutions and partnerships build networks which facilitate local level co-operation. This chapter explores the ways in which research can assist with the formation of government policies which facilitate the kinds of partnerships and networks which enable community strengthening.

For government, the changes required for a successful community strengthening policy can be divided into structural, instrumental and work culture/skills changes. Structural changes include: roles for the community sector; a role for local government as the steward of community strength; moves away from the programme format; and the organisation of democratic decision making within the policy function. The emerging problem here is that, in general, it is hard to see how departments based around centralised decision making and expert knowledge, with an institutional interest in defending 'their' territory, can succeed as *bona fide* partners in community strengthening. In terms of the instruments required to give community strengthening the greatest chance of success, we need to be thinking about the barriers presented by annual budgeting, fragmented grants, the planning fetish and the obsession with short-term monitoring and reporting. We also need to consider the opportunities we have at hand in instruments like output budgeting and community consultation. Challenges in the area of work culture and skills are

more subtle. Here the entrenched orientation of many agencies towards public choice reasoning has had the effect of devaluing local knowledge and undermining the idea that public administration is about service. On one hand, in whatever form it takes, the cult of the expert undermines the possibility of effective community strengthening because it devalues knowledge from outside the circle of bureaucrats and consultants. On the other, market-oriented instruments, while strong on cost signals, are weak on community service.

For communities there are also serious challenges if community strengthening is to be made to work. One is the issue of sustainability. For any community the effort-reward balance of engagement with policy processes must be demonstrably positive if it is to be sustainable. So connections into local institutions which bring additional resources into the community are important. Another is the nature of leadership and involvement in the community. If there are too few activists in a community the work of engaging with policy processes and implementation will fall too heavily on too few people. Distributed leadership and broad engagement is necessary to spread the burden. Finally there needs to be tangible, and probably economic, benefit to the community to convince people that the cost of maintaining their involvement is worth their while.

At State level in Australia, all governments now have a department, unit or minister responsible for community development. Victoria was the first to embark on this process and has the most developed whole-of-government community-based approach. Two broad areas of interest have emerged from this experience. One is the actual experience of implementing community strengthening as a central policy in the State of Victoria. This has been evident in prominent policy documents (Victoria 2001), as well as in the establishment of and research undertaken by the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) (Hess 2003; DVC 2004a, 2004b, 2005a, 2005b, 2006). The other is the need for some serious thinking about the coherence of the ideas underpinning the practices. Without a systematic thinking through of its fundamental principles and implications, community strengthening runs the danger of becoming no more than a passing policy fashion. If such coherence can be achieved, however, it may be possible to build the practices we are now observing into something genuinely new and valuable in addressing the increasingly complex problems of contemporary government in market-oriented democracies.

The practice: community strengthening in Victoria

In the Victorian government's policy approach of the last five years, the nexus between community strengthening and governance has increasingly emerged as a significant factor in the likelihood of policy success. Considerable experience and action research now make it possible to understand how governance contributes to making community strengthening effective and what this implies for the future shape of public administration. The key governance issues which have emerged from this practice are:

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- the understanding that what makes a community strong is connectivity and it is networks which create the connections linking individuals and social institutions,
- the understanding that the relationship between such local level activity and central government processes needs to be based in partnership and co-operation.

DVC has sought to capture this in its definition of community strengthening as creating sustained networks through local-level partnerships involving key stakeholders and community representatives to achieve agreed policy and service delivery outcomes (Blacher 2005). At one simple functional level, then, community strengthening describes an approach to policy aimed at increasing the number of people who participate. The ideas which have underpinned this and the instruments which made it possible provide answers to the questions of 'why?' and 'how?' community strengthening has emerged as a whole government approach in Victoria.

In terms of ideas, Victoria's community-based policy approach began with the realisation that communities, be they of location or interest, are important for the simple reason that they are where people live their lives. This has a series of implications for government, not the least of which is that communities, of location and interest, shape both the perception and reality of government services. Mounting international evidence that strong communities are better able to look after their members and to access and use services has now been borne out in Australian research. For example, Vinson's Victorian study demonstrates that community strengthening interventions can drive a wedge in the cycle of disadvantage. This study found that children born into communities with low social cohesion (networks) had high school drop-out rates. Those born into disadvantaged communities with high social cohesion had much lower drop-out rates. The study also showed a link between communities with high levels of early school leaving, low social cohesion and imprisonment. Similar disadvantaged communities with high levels of early school leaving but with high social cohesion had low levels of imprisonment (Vinson 2004).

In terms of instruments, community strengthening describes an approach to policy aimed at increasing the number of people who participate. While participation is hardly a new phenomenon, its application in the processes of administration today is different in fundamental respects. The Victorian government, for instance, has a long history of working with communities, starting back as far as the 1970s with initiatives such as Neighbourhood Houses, Disadvantaged Sites, and AA Plans, while in the 1980s, Community Health, Landcare, the Rural Women's Network and the rural Employment Networks were important policy initiatives involving community-based participation. The differences in the contemporary policy settings are about both quantitative and qualitative factors. Not only are huge resources being put into the approach (the current *A Fairer Victoria* programme is costed at \$780 million), but it is a thorough, whole government policy setting which makes

it fundamentally different from the silo-based, project or programme delivery under which most public administration has operated for the last 100 years.

While a whole government level commitment is essential to providing policy coherence and mainstreaming, it is not the level at which the benefits of community strengthening as a strategy for delivering outcomes is clearest. Nor is it the level at which the connections between basic values, governance processes and the potential of community strengthening as a policy approach are most evident. The evidence to support the contention that local level co-operation builds stronger communities which in turn create the preconditions for effectively addressing complex policy problems comes, not unnaturally, from the locality level itself. In particular the relationship between building trust, the new governance models and the likelihood of successful community strengthening is reflected in the academic commentary (Alford 2004; Considine 2004c; Wiseman 2004) but is also evident in the published work of practitioners (ABS 2000; Klein 2004; Trewin 2004).

The evidence: measuring community strengthening

While measurement is hardly new to administrative science both the type of measure and the impact of measurement for community strengthening make it an especially crucial activity. The immediate context in which measurement of community strengthening has taken place has been the need to balance economic and social factors in public administration. Under new public management practices, policy makers and public managers became adept at measuring. This added vital hard data to the public administration knowledge base and made measurement instruments *de rigueur* for government at all levels. One practical problem has been the tendency for measurement to be based around *outputs* rather than *outcomes*. From the Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) of specific jobs to the project or contract completion criteria of particular work units, measures may focus on what is being done rather than on what impact this has had. Community-based knowledge has the potential to address this because it is in communities that we see the results of policies. Furthermore, in democratic systems based on residential electorates, it is in communities of location that votes get counted. Community-based measurement has clear potential for decision makers in terms of political sustainability because unlike the National Performance Measures (NPMs) it can tell us how particular communities are affected by and are reacting to policy outcomes.

Even where the importance of community-based impact measures are accepted, however, measuring or even defining what they are in respect of particular policy areas is not simple. The definitional difficulty of confusing outputs and outcomes has already been mentioned. A further need for definitional clarity is called for by the need to differentiate those social capital factors which lay the foundation for community capacity and the institutional arrangements which facilitate and/or hinder efforts to transform capacity into outcomes. So definitions need to take

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Community strengthening and the future of public administration

DVC has defined strong communities as those endowed with social, economic and environmental assets and organisational structures that work towards their sustainable use and equitable distribution (DVC 2004b). In developing practical ways of bringing community into policy processes in Victoria, it has become evident that there is a causal connection between the strength of particular communities and the nature and extent of their members' engagement in community activities. Because of this, DVC has moved to measure the concrete activities of community engagement rather than the more abstract idea of community strength. Engagement activities have two advantages in terms of measurement. The simple one is that because these are activities which can be observed they are more easily measured than an abstraction like community strength. The subtle one is that the action of measurement itself adds status to engagement in general as well as to the particular activities which are being measured. It does this by focusing attention on the fact that the activities have significance beyond their immediate objectives and that this is of importance for the way in which contemporary public administration seeks to balance fiscal and social objectives. Beyond the actual impacts of measurement, engagement activities are significant in assessing the potential of community strength as part of policy processes because they create connectedness and build networks. These characteristics of connectedness and networks within communities are, as we will see in the next section, fundamental underpinnings of the governance of the community-government interface. So some of the DVC indicators of community strengthening 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.

International and Australian research findings show that the benefits of participation extend to personal and collective well-being 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 (Coleman 1988; Vinson et al. 1996; Porter 1998; Berkman and Glass 2000; Lin 2001; OECD 2001; Szreter and Woolcock 2004). Overall, this body of research claims that community engagement diminishes the impacts of social disadvantage. 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 well-being noted internationally (Young and Glasgow 1998; Berkman and Glass 2000) is also reflected in the DVC findings (DVC 2004b, 2005a). 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).

A recent DVC research report, *Indicators of Community Strength at Local Government Area Level in Victoria* (DVC 2005a), builds on the previous work of the *Indicators of Community Strength in Victoria* report (DVC 2004b). 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.

From the viewpoint of developing better public administration practices, the capacity to measure this engagement is a vital activity for two reasons. First, community engagement cannot be legitimised as part of the mainstream of policy making and implementation unless it is measurable. This is the case because measurement enables decision makers to see the impacts of policy and to feel confident that its outcomes translate into community support. Second, because this measurement makes the connection between policy objectives and outcomes explicit, it provides a bridge between government and community. The problem of communicating the objectives of policy and establishing that the policy works is thus brought into the lives of people in ways which enable them to see its efficacy from their direct experience. In this sense, 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 well-being). The DVC experience of the communities agenda in government then points at the same time to the hard realities of measurement as a practical issue in policy, and to this particular subtlety of the act of measurement can bring to the government community interface. The Victorian experience shows that the act of measuring community engagement adds value to the policy process. The subtle value in measurement in this case is that the indicators can also build a bridge between the theoretical abstractions (e.g. that community engagement is democratic) and the practical reality (that we really need to know what a particular community wants/needs). The desired result is 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 DVC research agenda around community engagement seeks to reveal the

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nature of the gap between what residents feel their communities need and how they feel government is responding to these needs. It 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 chapter is based (DVC 2004b, 2005a, 2005b). 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 well-being 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. While it is taken up in the following section, it is worth noting here that DVC research now uses local government area boundaries to organise data. This is because of the insight that the robustness and outlook of local institutions – and how they choose to organise – is a key determinant of community strength.

In the DVC experience, then, measurement of community engagement has been important in clarifying the nature of community as a part of policy. It has also played a significant role in helping develop understandings of the characteristics of particular communities. The fact that these characteristics vary greatly makes this local-level research important if policy impacts in particular locations are to be really effective. Measuring at a community level also has the potential to reveal actual outcomes in ways at which we've previously only been able to guess. This enables policy makers to have a degree of certainty about the impact of allocating resources and particularly about how to target those allocations to maximise their real impact in the lives of people.

While efforts to develop more effective measures and to use them as part of policy process can tell us a lot about what is happening and how it is happening, they do little to address the deeper questions of why new practices are gaining momentum. In the case of community strengthening, this is compounded by the fact that there is as yet no single catchy title under which the changes in public administration described above can be conveniently grouped. There is, however, an argument that they do represent a fundamental change in the way in which government does business. While many of the ideas behind the practice are old, the ways in which they are being brought together and their implications for the structures and skills demanded of public administration indicate that there is room for an argument that they represent fundamental change for two reasons. First, the underpinning concepts which are legitimising the changes are so different from those they are superseding and are establishing a new set of meanings in public sector activity and the way in which it fits into society. This is underpinning the ways in which the knowledge being used in public policy and management is altering (Hess and Adams 2002). In broad terms this may be seen as a shift in the approach to knowledge from positivism to constructivism. This

change is significant for the way in which we go about the business of government in many of its aspects because under it the drivers of activity and the judgements about the efficacy of that activity shift from being located within the processes of government to being located in the relationships between government and communities of location and/or interest. The second element of paradigm shift in the contemporary public policy and management is that the new concepts are proving powerful in illuminating issues of public policy and management which have proven impervious to orthodox understandings and instruments. In particular, it may be seen as a response to deficits in NPM outcomes.

One implication is that rather than being a discourse resistant to external ideas, because they represent sectional interest, public administration increasingly becomes involved in an active search for new interpretive ideas and instruments because they reflect the experience of particular policy communities. So in epistemological terms traditional positivist approaches describe problems and identify the knowledge required to address these. They then either develop that knowledge within the processes of training bureaucratic experts or import it in the form of hired expertise. In an alternative constructivist approach, policy work actually interprets and constructs the meanings of the ideas and what constitutes usable knowledge about the ideas in any given policy area. Rather than searching for the 'right' definition of such ideas and applying objective knowledge to the rational pursuit of ranked goals, the constructivist approach posits that policy networks and the discourse within the networks constitute policy and policy commences with struggles over the meaning of ideas. These include the basic constructs of what constitutes the 'objective' or the 'rational' knowledge in particular policy areas. A partial conceptualisation of the difference is that the fundamental questions of positivist public administration are about 'what': what is the problem? What is the relevant expertise? What is the cost? On the other hand, those under a constructivist approach are about 'how': how can the appropriate people be involved? How can new knowledge be created? How can this be used in the particular policy setting?

Conclusion

Community has come into public management in a relatively unsystematic way. Because it has lacked a single coherent body of theory to underpin it, there is a possibility that it will remain just a series of isolated instances of clever practitioners solving problems they encounter in their daily operations. The experience of the communities agenda in Victoria indicates that there is more potential in these changes than *ad hoc* problem solving and that adopting a constructivist approach to the knowledge base of the new practices provides both clues to understanding its significance and to systematising its practice. Among the practical implications are issues of how the skills and organisation of public administration work need to change to generate and make best use of this new knowledge. If government is to integrate community concerns into policy making, public

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servants will need the skills required to 'put oneself in another person's shoes and build trust' (Davis and Rhodes 2000: 96). Some work on linking the theory of what needs to be done with the practical issues of how to do it is already happening in Australia (Hess and Adams 2002; Reddel 2004), but more is required.

In summary, the move towards a community focus in public policy and management implies a straightforward logic of change. In order to address the non-linear complexities confronting policy makers in market-oriented democracies, we need non-linear structures, non-positivist knowledge and non-rational (not irrational!) ways of working. In the experience of community strengthening we are seeing the beginnings of what this might mean for the future of public administration.

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