

The real thing

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Acknowledging people as citizens and not just customers is one key to creating genuine local government/community partnerships.

In Australia as in America, local governments tend to think of their jurisdictions as places and people with needs. They seek to address these needs by relying on tax revenues and bureaucratic expertise. Such a top-down approach may be appropriate at times, but it is certainly not sufficient. If government treats people as nothing more than customers, they think of themselves as ratepayers rather than citizens and feel alienated from their government. Moreover, a singular focus on services is inadequate when community needs are growing more rapidly than government resources and when increasingly complex social and environmental issues can't be resolved by agencies alone.

Some local governments are beginning to recognise that their communities have untapped resources as well as unmet needs. They are empowering and partnering with their communities through programs such as bottom-up planning, neighbourhood matching funds and participatory budgeting. Consequently, people are starting to identify as citizens and see the government as an extension of themselves. Many more resources become available to address local needs, and the solutions tend to be more creative, holistic and appropriate. It's amazing what is possible when government takes as much interest in its democratic infrastructure as it does in its streets, parks and regulations.

Steps to effective partnerships

Before it can empower the community, government must cease the harm that it inadvertently inflicts on community and begin removing its own obstacles to engagement. Three major steps need to be climbed in order to get to effective partnerships.

1. Do no harm

Ironically, in their sincere effort to help the community, government and other agencies often do it a disservice. They impose their own agenda which distracts the community from its priorities. They don't sufficiently value the time and contributions of the citizens who do get involved, so these citizens are less likely to participate in the future.

Most egregiously, agencies tend to violate the Iron Rule of community organising: "Never do for people what they can do for themselves." Non-profit directors often speak for the community. Agencies provide services that were formerly the community's responsibility. Government fosters dependence by paying former volunteers.

This isn't an argument for fewer or smaller agencies. There clearly are needs in communities that are best served by government and other agencies. And, most agencies don't have enough resources as it is adequately to address those needs. Agencies should focus on what they are uniquely capable of and allow communities to do what they do best.



Jim Diers in action at the Whittlesea workshops ...



... and working 'hands on' as a composter with local community members in Seattle.

2. Remove obstacles

It is extremely difficult for the community to partner with agencies as they are currently constituted, because agencies aren't accessible. Government offices are typically located far from where many people live and open during the same hours when most people work. Specialised language and bureaucratic procedures make it challenging for people to participate. Community volunteers can't possibly be involved in the totality of their neighbourhood or town, because every aspect of their place (e.g. public safety, parks and recreation, human services, public health, housing, economic development, transportation, arts and culture, etc.) is associated with a different agency, each with its own staff, meetings, plans and programs.

Government tends to be both too centralised and too segmented to relate to communities. Top-down decision-making doesn't accommodate the community's voice and cookie cutter programs and regulations don't respect unique neighbourhood design or community culture. Professional experts often discount the wisdom of communities, and they work in silos that make it difficult for them to share the community's more holistic perspective.

3. Build capacity

When agencies start to make room for community and to remove obstacles to partnership, the next step is to assist community in rebuilding its capacity. Agencies must be careful to do so in ways that empower the community and don't lead to further dependence. Appropriate capacity-building roles for agencies include leadership development, assistance with outreach and networking, and programs such as those described below that encourage the community to identify and utilise its own assets.

Hallmarks of effective partnerships

There are three hallmarks of effective government-community partnerships. When they are in place, they allow government to do what my former colleague, Henry Moore, described as "leading by stepping back."

1. Neighbourhood/community focused

Effective partnerships are locally based rather than centralised. They are focused on whole neighbourhoods or communities rather than on separate functions. Consequently, the community can easily participate and the resulting actions are both integrated and culturally appropriate. Following are some tools that have been used to help government move in this direction:

- Seattle, Sydney and many other cities have established little city halls in neighbourhood business districts, shopping centres, libraries or other decentralised locations. Not only do these facilities enable citizens to access a wide range of city information and services in one convenient location, but the coordinator for each little city hall also serves as an overt double agent, helping both government and the community to accomplish their goals by working together.
- Many cities have established interdepartmental teams with a neighbourhood focus. The City of Toronto, for example, has organised 13 Neighbourhood Action Teams "to support integrated City service planning and delivery from a neighbourhood perspective."

2. Strength-based

Effective partnerships begin by focusing on a neighbourhood/community's strengths rather than its needs. These underutilised resources include voluntary associations, the built and natural environment, local economy, culture, and the knowledge, skills and passion of every individual.

City of Whittlesea hosts Diers workshops

An international expert in participatory democracy, Jim Diers recently attracted more than 100 people, including local government representatives from around Victoria, to community planning workshops hosted by the City of Whittlesea in Melbourne's outer north. Representatives from Boroondara, Port Phillip, Manningham, Brimbank, Hobsons Bay, Mitchell, Darebin, Casey and Bass Coast Councils, as well as other Whittlesea agencies and local residents and ratepayers, attended the sessions.

Like many local governments, the City of Whittlesea consults thoroughly with ratepayers and residents in creating its community plan. But taking the next step, involving the community in implementing that plan, presents new challenges. That's where Jim Diers, who hails from Seattle, Washington, stepped in.

In his workshop, he discussed how local citizens can make the shift from ratepayers entitled to local government services to equal partners with councils to create the community they want. This approach gives communities and councils access to millions of dollars of resources, time and labour that would otherwise lie dormant.

The former director of the Seattle Department of Neighborhoods and author of *Neighbor Power*, Jim will be returning to Australia in March 2011.

- Seattle developed the Neighbourhood Matching Fund as a powerful incentive for communities to mobilise their strengths. The city provides cash for community-initiated projects when matched by an equal community contribution of cash, volunteer labor and/or donated goods and services. Over the past 20 years, the city's \$50 million investment has leveraged \$70 million worth of community resources, more than 4000 projects have been completed, and tens of thousands of citizens have worked together to make these projects possible. The program has since been replicated by Wodonga, Port Phillip, Sydney, Wyong and other cities and towns throughout the world.

- Involving All Neighbours is a Seattle Department of Neighborhoods program that involves persons with development disabilities in community life by focusing on their gifts and connecting them to existing community initiatives.

3. Community-driven

Finally, and most importantly, effective partnerships should be led by those who will live with the outcomes – the community. It is not enough to decentralise services or to mobilise underutilised resources. The community must have a voice in deciding how those resources can best be used.

- In the late 1990s, Seattle gave communities the power to create their own neighbourhood plans. The community could define the scope of work and use city funds to hire a planner who was accountable to them. In return, the city insisted that all stakeholders be involved in the effort, that outreach be targeted at marginalised individuals, and that the entire community be given the opportunity to vote on the final plan. The 38 neighbourhood planning efforts involved 30,000 people and resulted in over 5000 recommendations. Broad-based community ownership of the plans meant that the city was held accountable for implementation. Equally important, the community took responsibility for those recommendations that it could best implement.

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YoWiLG update



2010 YEAR OF WOMEN
IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT
CREATIVE | STRONG | INCLUSIVE | DIVERSE

Celebrating women in politics
At its recent National General Assembly, ALGA released the booklet *Women in Politics*, which features a number of local government elected members, some of whom are also YoWiLG2010 Ambassadors. The booklet aims to encourage greater participation of women in political life in all levels of government and tells the stories of outstanding women in government as a way of inspiring other women to follow in their footsteps.

The Governor-General, Her Excellency Ms Quentin Bryce AC, contributed the foreword to the book, which also includes a historical overview of women in politics, a review of what is happening across Australia at local government level and profiles of women such as Premier Helen Irons, the Hon. Tanya Plibersek, Senator Sarah Hanson-Young, Cr Rose Jackson and Indigenous councillor and YoWiLG2010 Ambassador, Joyce Grantie.



Participants in the forum included (back row, from left) Helen Lawless, Banyule City Council, Noelene Duff, Whitehorse City Council and Kirsten Costa, Jenny Merkus and Mayor Cr. Stella Kariofillidis of Moreland City Council; (front row, from left) Nerina Di Lorenzo, Moreland City Council, Joy Nunn, Hume City Council and Katrina Knox, City of Darebin.

The forum was open to council women (and a few men) working in Melbourne's northern municipalities and was attended by more than 65 participants from the Cities of Moreland, Yarra, Mooney Valley, Darebin, Banyule and Hume. The women involved had the chance to discuss their professional concerns on council performance in the gender divide and pay inequity gaps.

Opening speakers Peter Brown, CEO of Moreland Council, and Moreland Mayor Cr Stella Kariofillidis spoke about supporting women and raising awareness of gender issues and working towards making local government an employer of choice for women. Noelene Duff, CEO of Whitehorse City Council and an Ambassador for YoWiLG2010, gave the keynote address, highlighting the three aims for the Year of Women in Local Government.

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- Following amalgamation in Golden Plains, Victoria, farmers were picketing the Town Hall to protest inadequate services. Local officials had a very limited budget, so they turned to the only untapped resource they could find – their community members. In 2000, they involved one quarter of the municipality's 16,000 residents in the creation of 23 community plans. The plans resulted in the identification of 120 priorities; 600 citizens volunteered to manage the implementation of these recommendations. Thanks to broad ownership, the community and government together found ways to implement 96 per cent of the plans' priorities. The Golden Plains Council subsequently received the highest citizen satisfaction rating of any local government in Victoria.
- Other cities give communities a strong voice in developing the government's budget. In St. Paul, Minnesota, neighbourhood representatives draft the city's capital budget. The city budget of Puerto Alegre, Brazil results from widespread neighbourhood-level discussions.

Of course, the community's voice must be broad-based. Too often, self-appointed leaders, whose mouths are bigger than their constituencies, claim to speak for the community. Government has a role in insisting that the associations with which it partners be democratic and inclusive. Government should also provide associations with the training, technical assistance and other support they need in order to represent the community adequately.

Andi Diamond, CEO of Yarra City Council, spoke about the invisibility of women executives in local government, why women don't apply for senior roles, and how to inspire more women to put their hands up for the top jobs. Moreland Council's Director of City Infrastructure, Nerina Di Lorenzo presented an inspiring keynote address on her career as an engineer, which began on an oil-rig in Bass Straight. She spoke honestly and directly about navigating career advancement, whilst caring for her two young children.

Following the keynote address, a lively debate was held on the topic 'The obstacle to career progression for women in local government is work/life balance, not capability or culture'. Both sides argued well, but after a final outstanding performance, the 'against' team emerged victorious.

The forum wrapped up with a workshop on 'What has helped and/or hindered you or others in your careers within local government'. A number of interesting and highly topical themes emerged from the workshop, including the need for single and mixed gender networking opportunities, more examples of inspirational stories from women working in local government and long-term sustained organisational change.

The most popular of these critical components for change was the need for greater access to mentoring programs – official and unofficial – at all levels of local government. A number of the forum presenters including Noelene Duff and Andi Diamond acknowledged the important role mentors played in their own careers, and this issue was further highlighted throughout the event.

The comments resulting from the day will be sent out to all forum participants and used by Moreland's human resources unit to advocate for change within Council. The YoWiLG2010 National Steering Committee will also use the results of the forum, as the basis of a nation-wide survey to identify similar trends in other councils.

- In Taiwan, the federal government supports Community Empowerment Centres throughout the country and a Young Community Planners Program that provides in-depth training for aspiring activists.

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In my travels throughout Australia – from Hobart to Newcastle to Perth – I have been impressed by the deep commitment to community on the part of so many councillors and managers. However, for a genuine partnership, government must move beyond customer service and citizen engagement to community empowerment. Although it is laudable that so many municipalities are implementing programs of community planning, for example, most of the planning is not sufficiently decentralised or citizen-driven. Planning can be a wonderful tool for gaining broad and inclusive citizen engagement, for building a stronger sense of community, and for tapping local knowledge, skills and other resources, but those benefits will only be realised when communities are empowered to develop their own plans. Getting local officials to take that leap of faith is a major challenge everywhere. I am hopeful that local governments in Australia will help lead the way.

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