

ARE WE BREAKING DOWN THE SILOS OR JUST PUTTING IN WINDOWS? COMMENTS ON A REGIONAL AUSTRALIA PLACE MANAGEMENT INITIATIVE

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Introduction

Place management is well positioned in the search "...for institutions and systems of government and governance that fit, and will work well in, a post-modern world..." (Stewart-Weeks, 1998; p2). To understand why this may be so from a regional perspective it is necessary to consider the space: *post-modern world* as this relates to regional Australia. Regional development policy in Australia over the previous three decades has been heavily influenced by the neoliberal agenda: "...state withdrawal and coordination of civil society through economic self-interest (Martin and Halpin, 1998; p454). Within this space, the place management model seeks to construct an integrated framework capable of supporting the changing state and regional civil relationship and ultimately to engender new forms of governance.

A clear expression of Federal intent for regional Australia came through the Regional Summit Steering Committee formed subsequent to the Regional Summit of 1999. The Steering Committee confirmed the participation of federal, state and local governments together with the private and community sectors was both integral to and responsible for addressing regional economic development at the community level (Commonwealth of Australia, 2000). The empowered civil community was to become the local level from which the bottom-up approach would ensure social acceptance and integration of economic policies through 'ownership' of local issues and planned responses (Simpson, Wood et al., 2003; p277). Thus, 'community' became the '...new terrain of governing.' (Higgins and Lockie, 2002; p421).

The empowered self-reliant community, it has been said, represents a '...convergence of neo-liberalism and communitarianism...' requiring increasingly expanding networks of interest and relationships between the community, the state and the market (O'Toole and Burdess, 2004; p434). These 'transformations in governance' have not replaced government's 'vertical' hierarchical systems but have created 'horizontal' governing: interaction with non-government entities through the new market oriented techniques for service provision (Hill and Lynn, 2005 citing Kettl, D. 2002). In this new environment, seen by some as transitioning from 'government to governance.' (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins, 2004; p289), the role of community-led development associations has been effectively recast as the '...avenues for local governance.' with broader economic and social focus (O'Toole and Burdess, 2004; p433). Indeed, such has been the proliferation of these approaches, it has been said that: '...the boundaries between and within public and private sectors have become blurred...' (Stoker, 1998; p17).

Within this environment government initiatives deployed through local community development programs have increasingly dominated regional Australia policy and planning agendas. However, the complex nature of regional socio-economic issues, particularly within rural communities, has presented a challenge to traditional government departmental structures and program-driven interventions. In response, and similar to the United Kingdom, Australia has seen an uptake of "whole-of-government" approaches premised on greater collaboration of public sector agencies within and between different levels of government and community (Simpson, Wood et al. 2003; Ryan and Walsh 2004). The nature of collaboration between government agencies has been

referred to as 'operational partnership arrangements' which in some circumstances may also extend to include the business sector (Homel, 2005; p361).

However, according to Ryan and Walsh (2004, p622), the 'shared nature' of whole-of-government approaches challenges traditional hierarchical reporting and accountability structures within functional, vertical silos of government service delivery. Also, the 'increasingly sophisticated' nature of approaches such as whole-of-government further illustrate the need for an 'integrated framework' focused on the achievement of outcomes: the place management model (Homel, 2005; p363).

Case Study: a Regional Australia Place Management Initiative

This case study is exploratory in nature and concerns a regional Australia local government area (LGA) dominated by extensive agricultural farming and pastoral activities. The LGA is also characterised by an ageing population comprising multiple ethnic groups including a significant indigenous population. Despite numerous funded initiatives, including the complex involvement of the three tiers of government and community, significant and entrenched community issues arising from socio-economic disadvantage have persisted. In response, a co-operative whole-of-government place making project (Project) was established. A Place Manager was appointed to perform a liaison and facilitation role between the various groups within the community. The core considerations underpinning the Project relate to: crime prevention; community development; economic development and strengthening community organisations. The interviews were conducted in 2005 and each of the key respondents cannot be identified, but has been given an identity code: P1, P2 etc.

Comments

This case study comprised interviews direct with participants from the project and from local private sector organisations. The following comments reflect participants' understanding, evaluation and assessment of their involvement or association with the place management initiative. Common themes influencing collaboration and impacting upon the concept of silo mentality have been grouped as follows: Why a Place Management Approach?; The Role of the Place Manager; Transient Key Decision Makers; Government and Non-government Silos; The Importance of Process Outcomes.

Why a Place Management Approach?

It was recognised that the success of this Project was dependent upon local participation and commitment and like many regional communities the LGA was '...no longer receptive to programs developed in the city and transplanted into the country in a 'one model fits all' approach'¹. The issues were considered complex and too broad for any one agency to really deal with well. The Project was therefore conceived primarily as a whole-of-government initiative in which participants would strategically address human service delivery issues and '...accept some kind of joint responsibility...' (P1).

¹ Source: Project documentation

Participants generally regarded the building of relationships as characteristic of place management. Whilst under the auspice of a state government organisation the project also involved financial participants from local and federal government. The common understanding was that the Project's community objectives required the effective utilisation of resources by all relevant agencies: '...there is no rocket science involved...it can be as little as two agencies who get together and agree that they can do something...' (P1).

It was felt that what differentiated this Project from the usual form of collaboration was that in this Project it was the level at which collaboration between participants from three levels of government was occurring. The Project brought together regional and local senior management with, or access to, funding and decision-making authority: '... airing things that would never be aired at interagency level' (P3). Another benefit of this style of forum was that it raised the level of awareness and understanding of the operational limitations and organisational politics that each participant confronted:

...There are so many strings attached from various ends. If you start working in partnerships like we are with place management you start to realise that it is just not us there are strings attached elsewhere as well to other groups (P4).

However, concept is one thing, terminology is another and as one participant, not supportive of the term *place management* explained: it was a fairly meaningless '...set of words and quite frankly we used it because those were the words that got projects funded...' (P1). Funding a collaborative project involving numerous state government agencies and interaction between government at local and federal level required a new way of thinking, however: 'Treasury are looking very much for an A+B=C but as you know when we have the human factor involved that can't happen...' (P1).

Commitment and collaboration were generally agreed to be the 'strength' of the Project: '...formed like a protection, a backup...' to both avoid duplication of services and to exchange information (P3). Further, as one participant mentioned, there was the added bonus of senior management recognition for working '...so intimately across what other government areas are doing and planning to do' (P3). The level of commitment and collaboration however were closely related both to the willingness of incumbents at any point in time and to the culture within their particular agency which if negative can stymie effective 'cross fertilisation' (P2). At its most basic level, the participants were considered to have a common desire to maximise resource utilisation and '...to make this a better place to live...' (P1). Interestingly, as far as the "place" was concerned, participants used the name of the major town and the LGA interchangeably and were not sure which 'place' was actually referred to. 'I never had that geographic notion...[we] all have different geographic boundaries...' it was about why aren't we as a group of agencies doing our job better...' (P1).

The Role of the Place Manager

The appointment of a Place Manager from outside of the region, rather than a local identity, was regarded as a way of bringing a fresh approach to the issues from somebody who comes without personal and political baggage. It was considered that the role of the Place Manager was to come in '...quietly, underneath, around the sides, and try to build a table...that will actually allow these people to come together and look at joint problem solving...' (P1).

All participants acknowledged the commitment and capability of the Place Manager. However, it was suggested one of the "myths" surrounding place management is that once engaged a single

place manager is seen as responsible for resolving all the identified issues and that is like: 'setting somebody up for failure' (P4). It was thought that the position was retained for too long and became the central focus of the Project. The role created expectations that could not be fulfilled, and on some levels and for some participants it challenged the viability of the place management model itself (P1).

Following completion of the Place Manager's contract after four years, the project re-formed from a traditional place management model to one managed by the committee. As one participant explained, the traditional model was '...fraught with danger because we had a project with a time-line and specific funding' (P3). This new arrangement was considered 'less troublesome' as participants took ownership of the problems and coordinated responses through their existing charters, funding and accountability with responsibility back to the committee (P3). However, the exact nature of individual responsibility was difficult to ascertain. It was suggested by one participant that the Committee's hesitation in accepting a joint planning responsibility meant participants focused on individual projects. Consequently, reinforcing collaboration was further challenged without the commitment to an 'integrated strategy or plan' (P7).

Transient Key Decision Makers

However, what participants did find troublesome was that 'the learning that you can benefit from isn't there in the place for long enough' (P1). The transient nature of employment both within government and non-government organisations and/or the difficulties involved with agency restructures was an issue. It was felt that key decision makers within organisations were at different levels of awareness and understanding and this made it difficult to promote a shift in thinking and direction to a place focus (P3). Strategising around this was considered too difficult and the best solution was to ensure that the "table" remained at which new participants might or might not attend (P1). As one participant expressed:

You get to a point which is like Utopia, everyone is talking with everyone, everyone knows what the right and left hands are doing, no one is overlapping in a negative way, no one is duplicating services, we are all harmoniously plodding along and then there are transfers or the funding runs out and the whole thing falls apart and you have to start again with new people, hence: you can't stay in Utopia (P3).

Government and Non-Government Silos

However, it was generally acknowledged that even this version (or is it a vision?) of Utopia has an unavoidable reality: silo mentality. It was also suggested that the characteristics of silo mentality are not limited to government agencies and can be attributed to non-government organisations as well.

With respect to government agencies, commentary on silos referred to a range of issues:

- At an agency level, the prevailing culture may reduce or even prohibit participation in collaborative efforts even in situations where the initiative has formal senior management sign-off: '...it doesn't translate all the way down - it is not sold all the way through' the organisation...' (P2).
- An agency may pursue its own interpretation of whole-of-government rather than somebody else's: 'There is a really strong element of that sort of stuff...' (P7).
- Collaboration may be challenged by the agency's performance management system which is closely aligned with the achievement of the agency's own community focused programs (P7).

- For an individual, particularly in a regional environment, another form of service delivery may be considered threatening to job security: ‘...it is about politics, it is about protecting your position because if you are in a relatively senior public sector job in a country town then there is probably not another one out there for you...’ (P1).
- The scale of projects. It was considered easier to break through silos when working on projects in smaller communities involving smaller amounts of money, whereas it was thought silos will always exist in larger communities with larger budgets: ‘...because of the amount of money and the difficulty of looking at it as one whole amount...’ (P3).

Participants generally agreed that they work within organisations that have a silo mentality and that in this Project they have to be aware that it does not ‘surreptitiously sneak in’ (P3). Also, it was pointed out that ‘power games’ were not as prevalent at the rural or regional level but became increasingly more so at central senior levels where: ‘...hierarchical control takes over and things get siloed again’ (P3). Nevertheless, as several participants pointed out, silos do also exist at a local level: they are just not necessarily formed and reinforced for the same reasons. Elected local government attracted considerable criticism: it was seen as highly politically factionalised, with no broad commitment to any sort of social agenda or willingness to engage externally. As one participant commented:

When you get a project like place management coming along which is a little bit out of the box or is trying to take an alternative approach to community capacity building...unless you have got pretty close on unanimous support for backing the project then you don’t want to do it: it is a waste of time (P6).

However, recognition was also given to the external factors impinging on local government. It was suggested that local government’s lack of understanding is a product of its lack of involvement and this because of a wariness to commit additional funding and resources given the significant cost-shifting that has been occurring between the levels of government to local government. In this situation it was felt local government had been left with direct accountability to the community but without the autonomy to manage the programs and this: ‘...basically puts local government in an area called frustration...’ (P4).

Frustration with the agendas of some non-government organisations (NGO) was also expressed by government participants, although their value and contribution to the community was not in dispute. Participants, mostly speaking generally about place management and not specifically of this Project, regarded the place management forum as an opportunity for government to come together ‘...without fear of bad press’ and not for collaboration with an NGO: ‘...which has a political agenda and is out there to kick your butt...’ (P2). The solution for later place management projects was to structure meetings such that government met for the first hour to discuss government related issues and the second hour was opened up to non-government participants and the discussion of broader issues. However, as one participant pointed out:

...the reality here is that place management is in some ways absolute pie in the sky stuff...[Government]... can’t and they never will be able to sit at a table and have an honest conversation about how they might work together to solve things if the Chamber of Commerce and the local NGOs are going to dive in and pick up the funding for the projects that government may be having difficulty with...(P1).

Several participants made reference to the competition between government agencies and the increasing competitive nature of non-government organisations: ‘...because they are the ones who have to fight more for the resources...’ (P7). One participant noted that there is an expectation that all community organisations should be invited to the table and if they are not it

is perceived as some sort of 'secret society' (P1). However, it was pointed out that the issues involved determine not only the level and nature of involvement but also the desired outcomes and in this: '...the beginning point is that table...' (P1) where:

You have to find a safe enough space that will allow some of the people to talk about some of the problems and actually allow them to do something or you keep insisting that we can all have place management and this ideal fantastic thing is going to happen: and it is not (P1).

The Importance of Process Outcomes

It was generally agreed that the early resolution of process outcomes and communication of the Project's outcomes were two areas that could have been handled better. As one participant remarked:

In terms of what is happening on the local scene, place management has not been a big-ticket item. It has been a mess as far as the community goes. Mess is a broad term but many people including myself didn't really understand: why it started; what the terms of reference were; what the criteria were; what sort of skills they were looking for; and what were the outcomes (P6).

Another participant further suggested: '...the whole thing looked at projects that could achieve some outcomes...' which probably met political demands but did not adequately address the: who, how and why issues (P7). Also, whilst generally acknowledging the success of the local private sector and the strength of local community and third sector organisations, participants were unsure as to why broader interaction with these groups had not occurred. However, as several participants noted, despite several years of operation, it has only been in the last eighteen months that effective group dynamics have developed, particularly that of establishing trust between participants (P7).

All participants saw the establishment of a forum for collaboration between government agencies as a major outcome and one that would provide significant benefits to the community. The importance of this was stressed and should not be minimised: Participants '...see their table that they come to as a really important place...' (P1). In terms of this place management project it was suggested:

The only reason it survived was because what we finally came to focus on was that success was not in fact some kind of measurable outcome: the success was the establishment of a project. It was allowing a process to take place and it would go through good times and bad times but the process remains (P1).

However, as one participant explained, this approach may work at the local level but is not sufficient to enable effective dialogue with Treasury and therefore facilitate funding: 'Treasury doesn't fund bottom up...and that is the trick' (P2). Hence, for the bureaucrats and the politicians outcomes are reshaped in terms such as crime figures: '...for them to be able to describe it in the terms that they understand...' and this political reality may prevent a broader focus being adopted (P1).

Conclusion

The degree to which this community intervention meets the 'organisational fusion' criteria of the whole government approach (Homel, 2005; p362 citing IPAA 2002) or indeed the basic requirements of a place coordination model (Mant, 1998; Stewart-Weeks, 1998) could be discussed on various levels. That discussion was not the subject of this paper. I suggest that the benefit of adopting, if not the conceptual model of place management, at least the terminology and such relevant framework elements as necessary, met a more fundamental collaborative imperative. This place management initiative provided a local 'place' from which the process of collaboration could be nurtured and developed in concert with the realities of centralised political and bureaucratic demands.

Breaking down or breaking through public sector silos is complex. Following completion of the place manager's contract the reconstitution of this place management project into one managed by committee is insightful. At this point in time and without the necessary leadership and 'cultural transformation' the difficulties associated with public sector collaboration would appear to remain contained within and engaged from the 'comfort' of entrenched government departmental 'structural tensions' (Ryan and Walsh, 2004; p628). However, this is not to suggest that this project is reflective of all regional place management initiatives.

Participants did not set out with the intention of breaking down or breaking through silos but did they put windows in the silos? There was general agreement on this point and sometimes expressed through different metaphors: '...there is a connecting door to this corridor that the silos run off and you can actually go down this corridor and chat with each other...' (P2) and 'I think we are chipping at the foundations and there is significant work to go yet before we start to make inroads' (P4). Collaboration cannot be assumed simply because an initiative's terminology and proposed operating structure suggest that is the case. The value of the process for local collaboration in this place management initiative was eventually attributed the same, if not greater, recognition than that of the Project outcomes. However, participants did not lose sight of the fact that this process reinforced the opportunity to respond to community needs because after all: 'The place project, whilst there was a whole chunk of angst attached, still provided an entrée into the community that we never let go' (P1).

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