

*Changing the* WAY  
GOVERNMENT  
WORKS  
NEW INTERESTS - NEW ARRANGEMENTS

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*Stronger Communities through Improved Local  
Governance: an Idea Whose Time has Come*

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For much of the 1980s and early 1990s the policy discourse among leaders in OECD countries was all but stalled by the equal and opposite claims of social democrats and neo-liberals, each concerned to defend the primacy of either state or market <sup>1</sup>. Meanwhile the engines of globalisation and the digital revolution were driving a search for a new political architecture to address problems of economic polarisation and social exclusion.

Often without a conventional ideological framework to guide them, the most innovative democracies in Europe and the Asia-Pacific spent the 1990s searching for new instruments to address these conditions. Their common interest was in building stronger local communities in the hope that they might be better placed to negotiate the new economic order.

Stronger forms of local connectedness and better integrated governance systems to mobilise these local resources came to be viewed as a means to address the priorities of economic competitiveness and social inclusion and to break from the previous paradigms and dichotomies which offered market and state as an either-or decision trap. Not without importance was the fact that community building also suggested an antidote to the declining legitimacy of political elites and parties and to erect a buffer against the rise of extremist leaders with exclusionary agendas. The stronger communities narrative was one of reassurance to middle class voters as well as a promise of reform to those being excluded from the new economy.

This ideal of helping to build stronger communities also seemed to fit well with comparative studies of countries or regions that were doing best, and with an analysis of those experiencing unemployment, poor health and increased crime.

When looked at from the perspective of economic improvement, the regions seemingly best able to mobilise themselves were often those with stronger social identity, better connectedness and greater social trust. It was not simply that the stronger cities and regions seemed to have fewer social problems, it was that when they experienced difficulty they appeared to have more and better internal resources to draw upon. In other words the promise of stronger community included important elements of self-determination.

Two important policy design principles emerged from these early experiences. First, social and economic problems were increasingly recognized as having *multiple, intersecting dimensions* requiring a coordinated set of different interventions by government. Second, these collaborative interventions were felt to require new forms of *local governance* in which different agencies, both national and local could act with sympathy for unique local circumstances.

While each country and political system had its own path towards these insights, a strong coincidence has taken place in regard to one central element in the search for ways to operationalize these two principles – local institutions and networks are seen as the key to stronger and more efficient social and economic processes. Where before the local agency or program was merely an adapted version of a standard head office template, now we see a common set of ingredients being mixed in different ways to reflect priorities and capacities of individual communities.

From Norway to Sicily and from Ireland to Illinois, a series of imaginative experiments have been taking place to achieve new forms of integration between ‘vertical’ actors such as national bureaucracies, state or provincial departments and municipal governments, and ‘horizontal’ actors such as firms, community organizations and civic associations<sup>2</sup>. The meeting point for these new forms of social governance is the local community. There is widespread agreement that the social and economic assets of a community or region contribute significantly to important outcomes such as health, economic innovation, immigrant economic success, youth employment, community safety<sup>3</sup>.

The public policy tools for mobilizing these local relationships and resources are found in strategies for community strengthening. Agencies as diverse as the World Bank, the OECD and the World Health Organisation now give priority to community building initiatives at the village and neighborhood level.

## FROM LOCAL GOVERNMENT TO LOCAL GOVERNANCE

Yet despite this widespread enthusiasm for localism, one fundamental question remains unanswered: What part is to be played by local government? Are municipal institutions to have a central role in the new collaborative governance, or will a parallel system emerge to supplement or even by-pass Town Hall leaders and established political processes at the local level?

Proponents of the new social governance appear conflicted on this point. As we will see in the cases cited below, the evidence suggests that many have preferred to commence work without a clear commitment to engaging municipal institutions in a strategic way. This paper seeks to evaluate some of these experiences in order to discuss opportunities for improved local governance in Australia. It does this by recognizing that municipalities have long and impressive traditions of local engagement of both citizens and community organizations. But it also acknowledges a number of gaps and weaknesses in the capacity of local government to rise to meet the new expectations and potential for collaborative governance.

The development of stronger communities is a complex task which includes a wide variety of initiatives. In fact one of the potential weaknesses in the concept, and in the new communitarian language used to promote it, is that most of what governments already do can be called strengthening of community. It is therefore helpful to first identify the characteristics of weak or fragile communities and to spell-out the ways in which this condition may impact on real social and economic problems. From there we can more easily assess what government can usefully do to help.

### *What is Community Strengthening?*

Communities are seen to be threatened or weakened when a number of conditions exist; when interactions between citizens and key social actors such as firms and civic associations are clustered around only a very limited number of relationships, when key decision-making actors are isolated from important information and from many of the embedded resources in the community, and when links between communities and key outside actors are confined to a limited number of pathways.

Stronger communities are therefore characterized by elaborate but efficient forms of connectedness – both social and economic, both internal and external.

Governments in Australia have an impressive record of achievement in the field of community strengthening, perhaps because the unique patterns of urban concentration and rural distance often require active intervention by government to support local resilience. The Victorian Community Capacity Building Initiative (CCBI) succeeded in mobilising eleven small rural communities, each of which developed action strategies to suit their local needs and resources. The interim evaluation drew attention to the important role of local government in several of these projects and also pointed to the importance of bring municipalities into strategies of this kind from the beginning.<sup>4</sup>

In Tasmania an innovative partnership strategy used a 'social capital' approach to generate jobs in regional areas.<sup>5</sup> The Commonwealth Department of Family and Community Services has used data on connectedness from family programs, neighbourhood houses and community centres to estimate levels of attachment and social support.<sup>6</sup> The Shire of Yarra Ranges on the Melbourne metropolitan fringe has initiated community building partnerships with 15 townships and is employing social capital measures to manage progress towards improved economic outcomes.<sup>7</sup>

Other innovative approaches to community building which take a municipal approach include an innovative strategy to build social connectedness in new housing estates,<sup>8</sup> a strategy to assist older people in the City of Boroondara by building their personal networks<sup>9</sup>, and a project in the City of Kingston which involves a partnership between the Council and local welfare agencies to create stronger connections with and between disadvantaged and vulnerable families.<sup>10</sup> Also using a multi-pronged approach is Port Phillip where many initiatives to reach different community groups combine under a strategy called the 'social cohesion project'.<sup>11</sup>

Key Dimensions of Community Strengthening
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|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Increased connectedness</li> <li>• Distributed leadership</li> <li>• Inclusive Partnerships</li> <li>• New governance institutions</li> </ul> |
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What these examples point to is the role of four key ingredients in helping communities to become stronger. Current practices in Australia have one or more of these, but few have all four. The first and most important element in the strategy is the desire to *increase connectedness* among key actors. These range from local neighbourhood meetings to elaborate forms of information-sharing across the municipality.

Second is the desire to foster *new forms of distributed leadership* by bringing business people, civic leaders and representatives of excluded minorities into dialogue. Third is the use of *partnerships and joint ventures* to encourage these actors to work together on local problems. And fourth is the development of *new institutions* to link these collaborations to the regular work of government. We will return to these conditions at the conclusion of the paper to see how they might inform a strategic approach to engaging local government, but first it will be useful to examine the evidence on best practice in this area.

To see how these important dimensions of community strengthening can be improved and mistakes avoided it is useful to look at a number of benchmark cases in other countries where these experiments have now had almost ten years to evolve and mature.

## INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCES OF IMPROVED LOCAL GOVERNANCE

To illustrate the four conditions outlined above we will concentrate first on two very different examples – the UK, and Austria. In the UK the model is of strong central stimulation of reforms, clear targets for defined outcomes, and elaborate options for institutional development. In the Austrian case the approach is one of experimentation, advocacy from the centre but few strictures, and diversity in local implementation. But in the case of these contrasting examples we find the key ingredients of an enriched form of local governance based upon;

- Commitment to stakeholder buy-in
- new structures to integrate the efforts of stakeholders
- new collaborative methods for setting goals and targets
- joint-funding and accountability

### *The UK -. Partnerships for Social Inclusion*

The Blair Government has made multi-agency collaboration a favoured policy tool in a variety of fields. The core commitment has been to social inclusion and thus the areas where partnership development has been most extensive include employment, housing, urban regeneration and public safety. The social inclusion agenda reflected a widespread concern in Britain that the benefits of economic reform in the 1980s were not fairly distributed and had in fact led to an increase in polarization.

This was seen to be both a market and a state problem. Market rewards were flowing disproportionately to those in profitable professions and businesses while state agencies that had once supported universal services (and social wage compensation for poorer market outcomes) were cutback, privatized or withdrawn. As Geddes (2001:175) points out, the partnership model involved a ‘concerted, multi-agency response involving private as well as public actors and empowering the disadvantaged themselves.’

One of the problems in assessing the UK experience is that there are now so many different uses of the partnership idea that it is doubtful that any single generalization would survive challenge. For example the partnership method has been used in the various Action Zones, in New Deal for Communities, the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund and Communities Against Drugs. In one recent report the relatively small district of Cornwall had over 100 partnerships and the government admitted that ‘local people and organizations find partnership working resource intensive’ (RCU;2002:2).

If we take the general field of Area Based Initiatives (ABIs) as a concrete example we can see where the UK experience informs the more general policy debate (DTLR; 2002). More than a dozen major initiatives focus upon disadvantaged regions or localities and empower different local actors to identify priorities and develop appropriate services. Most depend upon a central government grant scheme. Often the partners include different central government departments and the local authority, plus specialist agencies from the non-profit sector. However where this latter group is also likely to become a recipient of the grant program administered by the partnership more direct forms of citizen involvement have been used to create legitimacy. A Partnership Reference Forum initiative has been developed to manage this tension (Sullivan and Skelcher, 2002:25).

Local authorities occupy a contested terrain with other local groups. For example, the UK the Home Office identifies local government as a key agent in fostering 'community cohesion',<sup>12</sup> but in programs such as Sure Start, they are just one of the many agencies consulted by sponsoring national departments. More recently developed programs such as New Deal for Communities, involve a local authority-led collaboration.

The other important dimension in these partnerships is the distinction between facilitation, co-ordination and implementation (Stewart, 2003;281). In the UK there are differences on the collaboration between agencies and local communities depending upon whether they are seeking to identify priorities or resolve conflict (facilitation), provide oversight for a program funded from above (coordination), or develop local services using pooled resources (implementation). The demands upon participants are obviously quite different in each case, as are the opportunities for influence.

The governance implications of the UK models are thus of great importance since the scale and complexity of collaborative work has become so extensive there. Recent initiatives at national level suggest a re-ordering is taking place inside government. Area-based programs are being amalgamated or pooled into more manageable units. A strong priority has emerged to delegate 'more responsibility to the local level' (RCU,2003; 1), although this is somewhat ambiguous since it might mean either (or both) the local office of national bureaucracies, local authorities or local partnerships.

There is also a notable shift in policy thinking towards the idea that partnerships should be institutionalized into longer term commitments with legally defined responsibilities – suggestive of a new arm of government at regional level. Instead of being viewed simply in terms of centre-local dynamics and debates about decentralization, this new discourse appears to be about re-configuring local governance. Sullivan and Skelcher's study (2002: 217) concludes as follows, "The pattern of the local state revealed by our analysis suggests that a wider understanding of centre-local relations is

required. It is no longer sufficient to focus solely on local authorities; rather analysis must take in the local system of governance.”

- Central commitment to multi-agency solutions
- Focus upon social inclusion
- Redirection of program funds into local partnerships
- A collaboration spectrum from facilitation to implementation
- Direct citizen involvement in some partnerships
- Emerging interest in rationalizing and formalizing governance.

## AUSTRIA - PACTS FOR SOCIAL INNOVATION

The Austrian Territorial Pacts (TEPS) provide a contrasting experience based upon Regional Agreements sponsored by the national government. During the 1980s Austria began to deliver employment programs with the help of locally based institutions, mainly non-profit organizations. It was felt that they were closer to local issues, more flexible and free of officialdom.

Michael Förschner argues that from a national perspective they were “often more successful in approaching certain target groups with their specific problems”, more successful, in other words, than had been the regular bureaucracies. By the 1990s it became clear that the proliferation of these local actors and the continued involvement of a variety of bureaucratic agencies was creating excessive complexity. As a result a “more territorial based approach was defined where the linkages and interdependencies of labour market performance with other institutions and actors of the respective area became visible” (Förschner; 2003).

The resulting institutional structures involved Regional Agreements between; (1) each regional government, (2) the public employment service, and (3) the social partners – labour and business. The agreement involved the sharing or pooling of resources so as to focus attention on specific local needs. This was to break with the top-down approach of universal responses across the whole country.

The first agreement was signed with the regional government of Styria in 1993. When Austria joined the EU in 1995 the framework of the EU Structural Fund helped stimulate the signing of agreements with other regions. However, while involvement of the social partners did represent a leap forward because it brought new voices into the discussion about how to develop local services, “regional involvement remained weak”. In other words the partners were national employer and union organizations who may or may not have had strong local links. The institutional path here is provided by the fact that these national social partners represent the firms and employees who pay money into the employment insurance schemes.

What changed this imbalance? In 1997 the high unemployment rates ( 8 to 12 percent) across Europe became a focus of debate. The European Commission developed the Territorial Employment Pacts as a response to this problem. They used the Finland and Ireland experiences of local partnerships as a template for this, bringing onboard the local actors in a formal partnership. This coincided nicely with the Austrian efforts to create decentralization through the regional government system. It also mapped onto the all-important question of social services where regional government (like our

state governments) have the dominant role. What policy makers in Austria noted was that the regions were big providers of services and also big consumers of them. Both aspects could be used to leverage local economic development opportunities.

But this was not going to be enough to create real employment growth at the local level since there were real budget constraints on the extent to which regions could use their hiring and buying strategies to create jobs. It was also necessary to involve local actors in the development of projects. Because no additional budget was available, the partnerships would have to focus upon ways to pool existing resources in a region. Data was shared regarding common problems. Formal consortia were put in place to enable common decision making. Agreements were then signed between key regional actors such as the employment service, local employers and community groups. The federal ministry responsible for stimulating these actions was not considered one of the partners, leaving it free to be an 'honest broker'.

The Ministry offered to fund the local organisational structures of this partnership or Territorial Employment Pact. This includes, the cost of personal needed to run the office and keep the partnership going. No additional budget was promised. In other words, all of the operating budget had to come from the region, the regional LMS, the regional government, communities or other institutions present.

In the first period of development there were rather weak strategies at local level and actors tended to respond to whatever was available from the national level. Critics noted that the aims were often a bit fuzzy and that expectations were often very different between actors. The chief outcome was that local cooperation was achieved and new local institutions did emerge with real support.

This looseness in the first stage was perhaps a price that needed to be paid to allow a genuine buy-in by local actors. As the second and third round of agreements were developed it became easier for the federal ministry to share best practice and encourage greater clarity. Within a few years this became known as a European best practice case. The pacts have added distinctively new services and programs, not confining themselves just to coordinating existing public and private services.

Förschner (2002) and Campbell (2000) argue that the outcomes include real improvements in employment and economic activity. They also acknowledge that the Austrian case had some distinctive governance characteristics. First and most important was the decision by the federal ministry to use its limited funds to support the operating structures of the partnerships, rather than to

fund individual projects. Second was the decision to create a Partnership & Pacts Coordination Unit as a bureau independent of the federal ministry. Its purpose is helping the partnerships to gather and share data, benchmark good ideas, foster staff training, and design joint public relations initiatives to ensure good public knowledge of the visibility and benefits of the structures. Together these provide the foundation of what became the 'Austrian model' of capacity building.

Another key contribution was made by the EU Social Fund which helped secure a budget for these initiatives over-and-above what could be found by pooling local resources. Of course the Social Fund resources were only available to poorer regions and projects.

Despite their obvious virtues, the Austrian partnerships have "relatively weak cooperation with economic departments and entrepreneurs" (Förschner; 2003). Their starting point within the social policy sector of the national bureaucracy has meant that they have less connections at formal and informal level with economic actors. In Austria, as in Ireland, the challenge is to avoid a public sector dominance. Paradoxically in both cases there are strong links to public services but weaker ties to local government and local politicians.

- Central sponsorship by central employment ministry
- National funding for local secretariats
- Pooled funding by different public agencies
- National agency to support and advocate for partnerships
- Strong social policy focus

## **STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES - A STRATEGIC APPROACH**

When we review these international experiences and models from the Australian perspective we see that community strengthening has two different dimensions - one involving individuals and their connections to one another and one involving organisations and governance agencies and their joint actions to address local problems. A comprehensive strategy must take both into account.

In considering the policy opportunities to foster community strength we therefore need to see the choices available at different levels.

## SOCIAL CONNECTEDNESS - FROM ATTRIBUTES TO OUTCOMES.

	Individuals	Organisations
Background Attributes	Number of close friends	Number of local groups
Outcome Attributes	Gave advice, loaned money, etc	Advocacy actions, Joint projects

If we start in the top left hand square we can see that most measures of social connectedness ('social capital') are really measures of individual attributes such as the range and depth of personal ties to family and friends. These help us understand how such ties might offer the *potential* to help someone with key transactions such as finding a job, getting advice about a housing problem, or borrowing money to overcome a short term crisis. We can measure the number of personal ties and their diversity and this gives a useful guide to *background* levels of connectedness.

We know quite a lot about how many ties people have in different communities, but we know much less about which ones count in which situations. This has to be measured on another scale which is to do with *actual* forms of co-operation and productive interactions, or the *outcome attributes* of connectedness - the bottom-left square.

The second column in the diagram is the one involving connectedness among groups or associations. These can include non-profits, churches, business associations and even political parties. Here we find a rich evidence base for strong relationships between the tendency for communities to do better if they have high levels of membership in such organizations. Putnam and his colleagues have famously linked such attributes to economic success and improved health.

Again, when we move from the top-right square to the bottom-right quadrant we start to see that outcomes must be viewed differently from the background stock of groups or even the ties between groups. Instead we must view active social connectedness as the interactions which produce co-

operation, help solve problems or release important embedded resources such as local skills, information and various forms of social credit.

When we compare this model to the various forms of partnership and local collaboration outlined above we can quickly see that many of the forms of activation aimed at individuals are often performed by local government or by local civic groups supported from within the community. However the pattern of connectedness among groups and associations is often more centrally determined, in part because this is when the greatest resources can be found.

This helps explain the obvious mis-match in current institutional developments with local government often being excluded or treated as a minor player in several of the leading countries engaged in these local strategies. While they have good access and capacity to deal with initiatives aimed at assisting certain types of individuals, municipal collaborations have usually failed to build a wider base for associational collaboration – often because other levels of government ‘crowd-out’ this terrain or do not provide the right resource structure to give associations strong incentives to work harder on local governance questions. This is why the Irish partnerships are so widely cited because in this case the national government did make it clear that local structures would gain national resources and recognition.

Interestingly the US provides a different model for making sure the municipal level plays a key role, yet shielding the new structures of collaboration from bureaucratic overload at the local level. For example, in some successful inner-city renewal strategies the preferred instrument has been the ‘community development corporation’ made up of several different stakeholders including local government.<sup>13</sup>

### *Local Government Involvement?*

We have now seen that community strengthening involves both individual and organizational activation, requires leadership and partnership between different public agencies, and has the potential to address both social and economic priorities. Given this broad scope it is unlikely that any single platform or model will provide all the answers. This is why the Austrian approach is so appealing. It allows a characteristic group of local stakeholders to shape the collaboration in response to the forms of strengthening they identify.

In considering the governance requirements of such strategies from the perspective of local government we therefore have some major alternatives to consider, reflecting the kinds of experiences found in the case study and evaluation literature. These may also be seen as different levels of commitment to these objectives.

The first alternative is to make the involvement of local government optional. That is, to create an invitation and incentive for local government to become the local governance platform for a partnership, but to allow the possibility that some will decline that invitation. What this possibility suggests is that there may be more than one way in which local democratic accountability can be deepened through pacts, joint ventures and other collaborative structures. The best alternative is for state and federal government agencies to work with local government. But if this is not feasible, there will need to be some form of local constituency building (including elections and mandates for local representatives) to ensure that these new structures are not dominated by bureaucratic processes.

A second alternative is to make the involvement of existing NGOs optional. Again, the most desirable approach would be to mobilize existing civic groups to form the local consortia. But if this proves impossible, the approach needs to include methods for building place and identity-based groups or networks as part of the community strengthening process.

Finally, the international research points to a crucial fork in the road so far as policy emphasis is concerned. We might think of this as a third alternative. All partnerships and collaborations involve social and environmental goals. Some also tackle economic issues and these are probably the most demanding, yet rewarding models. In the former category, as one colleague in southern Italy puts it, "projects only grow while it rains", while in the case of local governance processes which also include economic development, the goal is sustainability.

### *Summing Up*

Stronger communities can only emerge from sustained collaborative action. Collaboration requires a special kind of fostering, nurturing and supporting. For this we must experiment with new forms of local governance such as;

- Stakeholder engagement
- Local problem identification
- Audits of local assets
- Joint prioritization
- Shared plans & targets
- Animation of local community members
- Building of leadership capacity

Careful assessment and deep consultation would need to precede any decision about which methods and instruments would suit which municipality. Those communities lacking the capacity to move towards a

more ambitious form of collaboration would need to be supported to begin building the necessary strengths to make it possible to move forward at a later date. Local government should be the pivotal player, but not the sole arbiter of community needs and goals. Local governance needs to include all the elected leaders and all those representing local associations and communities. These engagement processes need to be action-oriented and aimed at measurable outcomes.

The benefits of getting this relationship right are enormous. Strong communities not only have good internal ties, they also connect well to wider state and international networks. Victoria is well placed to move forward with an agenda of this kind. Many municipalities have experience in strengthening connections among at-risk populations. A few have begun to develop more strategic approaches to reforming their own institutional structures.

Most local leaders have a good grasp of the cross-portfolio issues that need to be addressed in tackling local social and economic challenges. What is needed next is a well sign-posted agreement about the way occasional and program-specific forms of collaborative action can be made more systematic, more accountable and more effective.

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