The theory and practice of community participation: engagement the first step

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1 Introduction

People are empowered when they are able to influence decisions that affect them and the Brotherhood of St Laurence (BSL) is keen to explore ways to facilitate the participation of disadvantaged members of the community in such decision making processes. This interest stems from the BSL’s mission to deliver services, develop policy and support social change that will achieve our vision of an Australia free of poverty. We aim to do this by empowering ourselves and the people we work with and by developing and building community capacity (BSL strategy plan 2005–2008).

BSL has a tradition of advocating for policy change to improve the life chances of people who are vulnerable to poverty and who live on the margins of society. BSL’s Social Action and Research unit has used rigorous research methods to understand the impacts of public policy on low-income households and to bring this to the attention of policy makers in both state and federal governments.

BSL is now exploring ways to involve these same people in decisions about how we work with them as well as to facilitate and support their participation in new modes of governance.

To this end, two community engagement projects were undertaken by BSL services and documented by BSL research and policy unit. Each project involved people on low incomes.

The first, The Torch Project (The Torch) was commissioned to engage—with a community arts-based approach—communities in and near Frankston (Victoria, Australia) so they could inform the development of a multi-purpose centre in High Street and to facilitate future community ownership of the centre (Jope 2005).

The second, the Victorian Southern Region Citizen’s Panel, that also took place in Frankston, used a citizens’ jury model of deliberative participation, for public tenants to consider how they would like to be involved with Office of Housing within the Tenant participation framework (Bice 2005, Jope forthcoming).

The Torch focused on contacting and involving Indigenous Australians and people from non-English speaking backgrounds and the citizens’ jury was the first example of deliberative participation in Australia that specifically targeted disadvantaged households.

This paper describes the main points of each approach and reflects on what was learnt about community engagement, participation and its relationship to community strengthening.

Context

Community strengthening

Government-initiated community strengthening initiatives have two aims: firstly, to address specific local problems and secondly, to involve people in identifying local problems and solutions and build their capacity to work in partnerships with government agencies and programs.

Community strengthening initiatives are informed by an assets-based approach to overcoming disadvantage: they rely on local knowledge and local resources to better address complex problems. In a paper reviewing community strengthening and local government in Victoria, Considine presents the following definition of community strengthening:

Any sustained effort to increase the connectedness, active engagement and partnership among members of the community, community groups and organisations in order to enhance social, economic and environmental objectives (Considine 2004 p4).
Most community strengthening initiatives are located in areas of socio-economic disadvantage, where a sense of community may be strong but local institutions may be weak and ‘sustained effort’ is required to mobilise and organise members to participate.

**Social governance**

At BSL, ‘social governance’ refers to the kinds of governance arrangements necessary for the community strengthening approach to be successful in drawing on the contributions of public and private stakeholders. It refers to decentralised, joint and devolved governance that involves community. To successfully demonstrate ‘active’ rather than token engagement of community and involvement in decision making, such partnerships must rely on robust and inclusive methods of participation that actually empower community to influence decisions. In social models of governance:

> People are empowered to participate through government policies which address personal and community disadvantages, commonly referred to as social exclusion and locational disadvantage (Stanley 2004, p.1).

The impact of public participation and the ability for the people to be empowered varies according to the method used. The International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) has developed a spectrum that describes increasing levels of public impact (see Table 1). The BSL sees particular value, for community strengthening, in the types of public participation shown in **bold**.

**Table 1 Techniques and levels of seeking public participation**

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Source: Adapted from International Association for Public Participation (viewed 9th December 2005)

**The role of the community service organisation**

In Victoria, the Bracks Government has based its major response to disadvantage on partnerships that require long-term commitments from both government and community (Victorian Government 2005). Communities have been promised a greater say in determining their own futures.

But successful partnerships between government and disadvantaged communities must start with an acknowledgment of and attention to any pre-existing inequalities and power imbalances. In order for some individual and groups to have their say and for their voices to be heard, structures and processes need to be developed and spaces made available.

Organisations that provide publicly funded services that have relations with both government departments and with users of those services are well placed to facilitate this participation. But it is because of their contractual relationships with government that they must demonstrate there is no undue influence in the process and that the recommendations are valid. This can best be achieved by using methods of public participation that empower and by making clear the level of influence members of the community can exercise within the governance structure. (Ref to IAP2 table above.)
Evaluating community participation

The methods BSL is interested in exploring are those that involve people in naming and describing issues from local perspectives and that recognise and draw on community assets. These and other evaluative criteria can be applied to demonstrate the process and recommendations are valid. Rowe and Frewer suggest two types of evaluative criteria (2000, p.11) that can be applied to public participation processes (See Figure 1):
**Figure 1 Criteria for assessing public participation**

1 **Acceptance criteria**

These criteria are related to the effective construction and implementation of a procedure.

1.1 Representativeness

The public participants should comprise a broadly representative sample of the affected population. Caution should be exercised with regard to disenfranchising poorer groups or segments of society and members of all affected communities should be canvassed.

The ‘task environment’ should be sufficiently friendly to allow ease of attendance and not disadvantage some members so that they drop out of the process.

1.2 Independence

The participation process should be conducted in an independent, unbiased way.

Managers and facilitators are not only notionally independent but need to be seen to be independent and public representatives should be independent of any sponsoring bodies. This independence can be shown through the appointment of a steering committee that incorporates members from diverse bodies or neutral organisations.

1.3 Early involvement

The public or target community should be involved as early as possible in the process and allowed to discuss ‘underlying assumptions and agenda setting and not just narrow, predefined problems’ (Rowe and Frewer 2000 p14).

1.4 Influence

The output of the procedure should have a genuine impact and be seen to do so. Clear acceptance beforehand as to how the output will be used and how it might influence decisions will ensure this criterion is fulfilled.

Using the media after the event is also suggested to inform the general public about the specific ways in which the output has influenced decisions.

1.5 Transparency

The process should be transparent so that the public can see what is going on and how decisions are being made. This might involve releasing information on aspects of the procedure; from the recruitment and selection of participants to the way in which decisions are reached to records of meetings.

2 **Process criteria**

These criteria are related to the potential public acceptance of a procedure.

2.1 Access to resources

Public participants should have access to the appropriate resources to enable them to successfully fulfil their brief. These include information resources, human resources, material resources and time resources.

2.2 Task definition

The nature and scope of the task should be clearly defined. It is important to ensure that there is as little confusion and dispute as possible regarding the scope of a participation exercise, its expected output and the mechanisms of the procedure.

2.3 Structured decision making

The participation exercise should use/provide appropriate mechanisms for structuring and displaying the decision making process. Documenting the process as well as the outcome is likely to increase transparency and the perceived credibility of the exercise as well as the efficiency of the process.

2.4 Cost-effectiveness

The procedure should be cost-effective given its primary purpose. The authors suggest that it is sensible to compare the cost of chosen method with the potential costs of alternative methods in both time and money and to consider the extent to which they fulfil the other criteria.

Source: Based on Rowe & Frewer 2000
These criteria were not explicitly applied to the following projects in their planning or implementation stages, but were considered when reflecting (after the fact) on the changes made to the citizens’ jury model in the Victorian Southern Region Citizen’s Panel (Jope forthcoming). They are noted here as useful criteria to assess methods of public participation.

2 Two examples of community engagement

The Torch Project: What’s possible?
The Torch aims to empower people to raise and act on difficult issues that often end up in the ‘too hard basket’ (quote from The Torch worker at High Street community meeting). The Torch team has experience in community theatre and they use their skills to blend art with community mobilisation. Torch projects focus especially on race relations and include Indigenous issues and multicultural themes and aim to mobilise community to hold an event that raises these issues.

At High Street in Frankston, The Torch used this arts-based approach to recruit members of the community and engaged them over a number of months to develop relationships and skills. This work resulted in a public event that raised local issues and reached some resolution of those issues.

The aims of this community consultation for High Street were:

- to engage the diverse communities of Frankston and surrounds in a process that informs the direction of the development of the church site and engenders community ownership of its future
- to explore key issues in the Frankston area under the themes of History, Culture, Identity and Belonging
- to create awareness within the Frankston community of the High Street project; its philosophy and purpose.

Engagement

Over 200 people were involved in the project over a period of three months. The process started with a gathering of people from community organisations. Here a priority was given to contact and include local indigenous Australians and people from non-English backgrounds. Workers from the South Central Migrant Resource Centre provided a high degree of organisational and logistical support.

Recruitment can best be described as the ‘snowball’ method. It relied on paid workers to use their individual and organisational networks to draw people into the project. Participation of service users was facilitated especially by providing transport and supporting people the ‘first time’ they attended. It’s easier to go to something new with someone you know.

A series of community meetings were held at the centre and involved people in activities to identify local landmarks, icons, characters. These ideas were then used in a script that reflected life in Frankston. This was developed in several workshops and presented in a public performance.

The performance was part of a celebration of community, especially its multicultural nature and its indigenous foundation. The celebration included folk dancing, singing, a belly dancer, poetry and other performances connected by two narratives that reflected the issues raised by community members. One hundred and fifty people attended.

The performance was preceded by an afternoon of mural painting, arts and crafts exhibitions, rehearsals, and a multicultural dinner provided by different ethnic groups.
Outcomes

The Torch Project team successfully invited to the site members of non-English speaking and Indigenous Australian communities from Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula. BSL workers also participated in the process and so were able to find out which activities people wanted at the site and to involve them in an ongoing relationship with BSL at High Street.

The Torch engagement and consultation resulted in ‘Anthroposalata Unlimited’, a celebration of cultural diversity that was organised and held at High Street. Over two hundred people were involved in the development of the concept and in the event. The combination of The Torch and High Street provided Peninsula resident Amalia Sintihaki with the first opportunity to trial her concept of ‘Anthroposalata Unlimited’ and the results encouraged her to develop this into a multicultural, educational and entertaining program able to be replicated in a variety of settings.

The main issues raised by participants during the development phase of ‘Anthroposalata Unlimited’ were the lack of connections between people and the lack of occasions for getting together. During and after the event many activities were suggested for the multi-purpose centre to enable a variety of people to connect.

The Torch process itself connected people and resulted in the formation of a local group that were eager to develop activities in the multi-purpose centre and to improve access to existing resources. Moreover, a wider network was also established around High Street. This now includes Indigenous Australians and people from many non-English speaking backgrounds, as well as younger and older people.

The first steps towards community participation in new models of governance for the multi-purpose centre were taken. This group adopted a café-style model of meeting together—based on the world café (Brown et al. 2001)—to develop activities at High Street. The World Café method provides a comfortable setting for participants to gather in small groups and engage in conversation. Small tables are covered with paper tablecloths, flowers are added to give an informal touch and coloured crayons provided to capture the value that comes from the conversations. At High Street this model combined a place to enjoy social interaction with community mobilisation and action. As a result, the redevelopment plans of the site have been modified to include a space for this café to continue to involve community in its governance.

The sustained effort of paid workers as well as volunteers to support The Torch process of community mobilisation became clear. Workers in service organisations were necessary to promote the project to their clients and to support their participation in its early and ongoing stages. Workers not only encouraged participation, they often provided transport and accompanied their clients to the community meetings and the event.

The development of the multi-purpose centre at Frankston is a great opportunity for the BSL to explore a model of community participation that is valuable to all parties: those being engaged and consulted and those wanting to engage and consult.

Victorian Southern Region Citizens’ Panel

About a citizens’ jury

In the public participation method known as a citizens’ jury, a group of 12–20 citizens are randomly selected to reflect certain demographic characteristics of the community. They are brought together to consider an issue or topic that is presented to them in the form of a question, called ‘the charge’. Detailed and balanced information is presented and the jury has the opportunity to scrutinise it, to ask for more information if required and after deliberating, to recommend the best option or options. The process is guided by a skilled independent facilitator. A guide to using citizens’ juries is available from www.iplan.nsw.gov.au/engagement/stories/docs/cj_handbook.pdf.
About this project
The BSL’s Public Housing Advocacy Program (PHAP) undertook to explore and demonstrate the application to marginalised communities of the citizens’ jury model of public participation as outlined by Lyn Carson (2003). A secondary intention was to explore citizen juries as a model of tenant participation that may meet the distinctive needs of tenants living in spot-purchased public housing (i.e. not in housing estates). Currently the main mechanism for tenant participation is tenant groups, which are most successful when estate-based.

Engagement
To ensure the panel reflected a regional demographic profile of tenants and to ensure random selection via computer-generated invitations, panel members had to be recruited through the Office of Housing (OoH). This presented a barrier as many tenants had unsatisfactory experiences with their landlord and wanted minimal contact with its officers and procedures.

To overcome this barrier BSL attempted to raise interest before invitations to be part of the jury were sent out by mail. Letters were sent to all public tenants telling them about citizen juries in general and about the particular event planned and its process of recruitment. Promotion using local media was also planned to raise interest to improve response rates to invitations.

After written invitations failed to recruit sufficient numbers, phone calls demonstrated the importance of personal contact, especially to convince people that their voice was important and would be listened to.

An attempt was made to involve demographic groups who would not necessarily be represented in the small sample. Smaller discussion groups (focus groups) were planned — with young people, Indigenous Australians, recently arrived people from non-English speaking countries people with a mental illness and older tenants—to ensure their voices were captured. Representatives from these groups were to be invited to brief panel members on the night prior to the jury.

Outcomes
The BSL aimed to recruit focus group members through community organisations that had existing relationship with these groups. Unfortunately this was not a successful strategy, mainly because these organisations and their members were not involved in the process from the beginning and lacked the time and commitment to put any sustained effort into a project that didn’t appear to involve them.

The tenants that were involved were very satisfied with the citizens’ jury as a way of influencing the OoH. One member stated that it was the first time he felt he had been listened to, while others felt inspired to become further involved in their community. One person felt it gave him the confidence to go and get a job.

The Victorian Southern Region Citizens’ Panel also demonstrated strategies to improve access of public tenants to a citizens’ jury as well as show it could be a successful method of tenant participation for more geographically isolated tenants in this region. Citizen juries could be used to consult with tenants on a variety of issues and an ongoing citizen’s panel could be trialled as a longer-term method of participation.
3 Methods of participation and community strengthening

These two projects aimed to demonstrate methods of participation that offer high levels of impact on decisions made. BSL approached these projects with an assumption that marginalised people face barriers to such participation and require assistance to overcome these barriers and that community service organisations were well placed to provide that assistance. BSL also wanted to test the idea that participation in a shared task not directly initiated by members of the community, which provided opportunities for people to meet, to develop relationships, to work together, to mobilise resources and to develop leadership and other skills, could strengthen community.

Both methods relied heavily on existing relationships between CSOs and individuals to recruit, to make first contact. From the beginning, The Torch targeted other agencies to recruit and support community participants. One strength of this approach was that the organisation was more likely to become involved in ongoing responses to issues raised. A weakness was that it required more work from staff who were not necessarily able to commit to additional activities and community development.

Both The Torch and PHAP relied on the mobilisation of community resources to overcome barriers to participation. These barriers were both tangible and intangible. In both places, providing transport, interpreters and childcare services was necessary to get people involved. Both methods also had to overcome more personal barriers associated with community members’ lack of confidence in themselves and in the process.

Many people who were invited to be part of the citizen’s jury felt they did not have anything to offer and that experts should be consulted. In this case, it was important to stress that in this model panel members are experts by definition because any decisions will affect them. They are then provided with the information and the opportunity to scrutinise and ask questions of the ‘professionals’ to make the best decision in their circumstances.

Furthermore, many people were not confident that they would be listened to and were concerned that their participation would not only be a waste of their time but could actually be disempowering. A commitment from the start to act on the community’s recommendations can overcome this barrier. If such a commitment is not possible, then the form of participation needs to reflect what level of impact is available to community members.

Once these barriers had been overcome most people were eager to be, not only to have their say about issues that affect and concern them, but also because both the Torch process through Anthroposalata and the citizens’ jury process were enjoyable, were held in safe environments and provided opportunities for social interaction.

Finally, a comfortable venue, food and refreshments made participation attractive.

Informed consultation (scrutiny and deliberation) provided informed results. The Torch process resulted in the identification of future arts-based activities, as well as other opportunities for people of all ages, both those of non-English speaking background and Indigenous Australians, to get together.

4 Conclusions

Within the context of social models of governance that rely on community participation, it is important to ensure marginalised people have the opportunity to influence decisions that will affect them. Both the art-based approach and the citizens’ jury were successful in demonstrating different strategies to recruit and engage as well as to inform, consult, involve, collaborate and empower:
As well as identifying issues and solutions they intentionally provided opportunities for social interaction and for people to own the solutions and take them forward in their own way. When part of the problem is social exclusion, a process that engages people, and listens to what they name as pressing issues, can become part of the solution.

But extra resources are required to support the participation of those people who usually feel excluded from political as well as economic and social processes. People all want to feel welcome and may require facilitated, safe and interesting spaces, refreshments and transport to be able to take part.

Most importantly, both of these projects demonstrated the size of the ‘sustained effort’ required to engage community members. The Victorian Southern Region Citizens’ Panel demonstrated that the citizens’ jury model was accessible to a non-mainstream population but that it needed to be adequately resourced. The review of the VSRCP highlighted the need to invest more in the planning and organisation of the jury and to ensure more stakeholders were included, from the beginning. While savings could be made at the event stage, costs could be shared by including more stakeholders. An increased investment of time—to make the process more accessible to community organisations and involve more stakeholders—could have resulted in an improved outcome. The Torch project relied heavily on other community workers who were able to devote time to encouraging, transporting and accompanying their clients to the series of community meetings and rehearsals. Without these workers there would have been no event and no consultation.

These two projects illustrated the ‘sustained effort’ required to engage community in community strengthening initiatives. As community participation in decision making is one aspect of the democratic process, it is important that this first step is done well and that evaluative criteria are applied to ensure this is the case. Public participation methods that are judged according to their representativeness, independence, early involvement of stakeholders, level of influence, transparency of decision making process, access to resources, task definition, structured decision making and cost-effectiveness will be seen to be empowering and will contribute to a stronger community.
5 References


