

Community Governance project – why our interest?

Presentation by David Robinson to ANGOA Research Forum in Christchurch 21 September 2009.

The Social and Civic Policy Institute is organising a series of events on community-based planning and community governance. Key issues that are of interest to us include the roles, forms of organisation, membership, functions and relationships with local and central government and the community of:

“Locally based community associations that cover areas smaller than those served by formal Local Authorities; that are formed voluntarily (not by statute) and are concerned with issues of governance in their communities as well as carrying our activities or providing services.”

Our objective is to provide an opportunity for active citizens, as represented by residents associations and similar organisations, to share their stories of working within their communities for positive change.

There has been considerable discussion and debate about what is meant by “community governance” and there has also been an assumption that SCPI’s interest relates to the reform of local government in Auckland.

However, we began a discussion around this issue and planning these workshops long before the Auckland reforms were announced.

So, why our interest?

When SCPI ran a series of events on “partnership” in 1998, with key-note speakers from Northern Ireland and Canada, much of the discussion concerned the value to government (central and local) of developing partnerships with the community. That is, how the community could help government attain its goals.

The role of community associations in becoming directly involved in developing policies and, in some cases, directly carrying out actions was less well covered.

Over the last few years SCPI Board member Tu Williams and I were members of the Committee for the Study of the Not-for-profit Sector in New Zealand. The committee spent considerable time and energy making a case for recognition of the governance role of associations. That is, to acknowledge the specific nature of their **governance activities** in addition to the usual categories used by Johns Hopkins University (and in general by Statistics New Zealand) which include functions such as sport, the arts, education, health, social services and advocacy. Eventually this resulted in a new category being introduced specifically for New Zealand – that of “Tangata whenua governance organisations”.

This category was introduced to cover those organisations that, while they might also have a service provision function or a responsibility for the management of a facility such as a marae, had as their primary purpose the “governance” of their local area. In these discussions it became clear that there are other non-Maori associations that also have a governance role in addition to their advocacy and service delivery functions. A concern with the process of governing their community is often their primary purpose.

In this current project we don't want to take away other descriptions of, or justifications for, community associations and action (advocacy, providing services, offering opportunities for volunteering etc) but rather to add and highlight the under-recognised role of governance. In some cases this may even extend into a parallel form of “**community government**” alongside the formal, statutory roles and activities of central and local government.

There are a range of organisational forms carrying out a variety of community roles and innovative strategies developed to address needs and opportunities in the communities where they are located. However, there is little literature or research related to these developments especially on the impact that taking part in community governance has on building community well-being (as well as in influencing policies).

That is, what is the intrinsic value of involvement in the governance of your community?

I would also like to note there is nothing necessarily new about the activities we are describing – what is new and has helped focus our attention is the:

Increased community understanding of their governance role, value and importance at a time when technological trends are reducing traditional face-to-face dialogue spaces and Government structures do not recognise, and in some cases consciously deny, the intrinsic value of community governance activities. Technological changes include the capability of selecting, not only your own music on an I-pod, but also your own individualised television programming, and your own (again individualised) news which can be selected to suit your own beliefs or prejudices.

The SCPI Community Governance Project is:

1. Collecting international papers on community governance and the impact on social and community well-being.
2. Collecting case studies of local community activities and reviewing them in terms of “community governance”.
3. Holding workshops - in Wellington in July and in Auckland in October - to provide an opportunity to explore these issues.
4. Planning a national conference in 2010 with additional input from commissioned case studies.

As a framework for our discussion we note that the function of local government includes three key roles:

1. The effective and efficient management of local services including transport and water supply.
2. The development of policies concerning the allocation of resources and the utilisation of land.
3. A space for the engagement of citizens.

The Royal Commission on Auckland and Rodney Hyde's response as Minister of Local Government, focussed largely on the first of these – how to make the provision of services more efficient?

In this case “big” was considered to be “better”.

There was a secondary focus on the development of policies but in this area both reports (to differing degrees) seemed to dismiss the contribution of democracy, dialogue and debate as being delaying and divisive. Instead they opted for a monolithic structure with a “super-Mayor” (forget the super-city you should be concerned about the emphasis on a directly elected Mayor with the sole power to set the budget, appoint Chairs of Council Committees and to develop policies).

Far from considering the potential input of community governance these reports downgraded the role of elected Councillors to one of approving critical actions of the “super Mayor” in the areas of policy and setting the budget. Although the actual functions of the proposed Community Boards are not yet clear it was initially suggested that they could deal with dog control and graffiti. This may now expand to include responsibility for local libraries and other facilities.

The role of local government in providing a “**space for engagement**” was given little attention and has been relegated to a side issue by most commentators on the Auckland proposals.

Proponents of strong and effective local government suggest that local government has a key role to play in “place-making”; encouraging and enabling citizens to feel an empathy with and a commitment to a locality. In reality this “place-making” function more often takes place outside statutory local government.

The more appropriate local government role may be to ensure spaces are available for community dialogue (and that barriers to such activities are removed) in order to enable, encourage and ensure the engagement of citizens.

As a background to our programme in New Zealand SCPI has been collecting relevant material from the international literature relating to community governance and the links to building social capital and social well-being. We are also in contact with others who have an interest in these and associated issues. In his response to my query in May Robert Putnam, author of “Bowling Alone”, said:

“There is a large and growing literature on the direct linkage between social capital (in its various forms) and happiness/life satisfactionBut little of that literature looks at the linkage between social capital/happiness, on the one hand, and local governance, on the other.”

And, John Helliwell, economist at the University of British Columbia, said:

“We do know the apparent importance of local trust measures (e.g. trust in neighbours) as correlates of inter-neighbourhood differences in social well-being, and we have some experimental evidence suggesting the importance of efficacious engagement in activities aimed at improving the quality of neighbourhood and community life.

In general, our survey results suggest the importance of local engagement and local efficacy, both of which could be subject to threat in the face of agglomerating governance.”

I would also like mention a comment from John McKnight’s lecture on “Regenerating Community: the Recovery of a Space for Citizens”. John McKnight was Barack Obama’s mentor in his early life as a community organiser in Chicago.

“In addition to being a principle means for citizens to be powerful and create power, associations provide a vital resource for creative problem-solving.”

Although there is international interest in these issues our focus on the “governance” or involvement in local “government” activities role has not been subject to widespread research.

Most studies focus on the community aspect of the term, (and look for links between this and social well-being) rather than on the community’s role in governance or government.

Our collection of case studies on community governance activities carried out by local associations has started with looking into our own experiences – that is, the SCPI Board and we have case studies from Pat Hanley of the Pukerua Bay Residents Assn, David Haigh on the Grafton Residents Association in Auckland and Tu Williams and my work on Social Capital in the Opotiki area. These activities have both drawn on the networks and social capital in their locality and helped to maintain and create it.

Key **functions** of such associations include:

- Building social capital and community well-being.
- Providing a vital resource for creative problem-solving (note John McKnight’s comment that “associations provide a vital resource for creative problem-solving.”
- And they also provides a space where “disagreement” can be freely expressed.

All communities do not necessarily agree on all matters....

If we analyse the activities of these community associations in terms of community governance this shows the potential for a move to governance *by* the community, rather than governance *of* the community.

These associations are also critical in the provision of spaces where citizens can engage in dialogue; helping identify community concerns and solutions

Participation in governance activities (formal and informal) builds social capital and enhances social cohesion. In this context social capital refers to the “connectedness” between citizens largely formed through social and cultural networks.

the **nature** of such associations is that, in general, they are:

- Not representative in a formalised way.
- Independent and have not been formed by statute.
- Their activities cannot be defined and directed by either central or local government – their agendas are not set by government.

They have grown from within the community and are responsive to that community – reflecting and representing the community’s agenda.

They cannot be restrained by Local Government rules about what they can comment on. A growing issue relates to the establishment of special purpose structures, such as that proposed to plan and manage the Auckland waterfront. Although Council rules may limit the degree to which Community Boards can comment on such matters, they cannot restrict the ability of independent community associations to do so.

Community governance associations do not have set boundaries but can engage in whatever the community considers to be of concern – examples in New Zealand have included active engagement with education, health planning and services, transport planning (Grafton), marine reserves (Pukerua Bay) and special needs housing.

Another aspect of community associations that is under-recognised is their role in terms of engaging in “risky” activities; or at least, in activities considered by government (local and central to be risky).

In general both central and local government are “risk averse”, and appear to be becoming more so, which can cause problems at a time when society is facing increasing economic, social and cultural challenges.

However, community associations can engage in “risky” activities – what they place at risk is their “reputation” – and what the community has to gain is the development of new ideas and their direct engagement in positive action.

SCPI’s goal is to put the issue of community governance clearly on the policy agenda for Government and civil society alongside (or even in front of) that of economic efficiency.

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