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Authors:

Anona Armstrong and Ronald Francis

Contact:

Professor Anona Armstrong
Director, Centre for International Corporate Governance Research
Victoria University
PO Box 14428 Melbourne City MC
MELBOURNE 8001

Email: anona [armstrong@vu.edu.au](mailto:anona.armstrong@vu.edu.au)
Tel 613 9248 1315

A project funded by the Australian Research Council: Evaluating the Community Governance of Crime Prevention and Community Safety:

The role of community governance in public sector programs and initiatives

Armstrong A. and Francis R.D.

Centre for International Corporate Governance Research Victoria University, Australia.

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Government programs are increasingly targeting community support to build cohesive communities and reduce inequalities. These programs support organizations which develop partnerships with local government, business and other government agencies, joined up government (which is the sharing of data, information and knowledge across government agencies and community groups), and promotion of community ownership of and capacity to address local community problems. Encouragement of partnerships across agencies is termed a 'Whole of Government' initiative. The whole of government approach brings together different government departments to address community problems which are seen as having multiple causes, effects and remedies. Community governance is concerned with the structures and processes for decision making at a community level. It is concerned with the capacity to function well, that is, the interaction of the human capital, organizational resources and social capital that can be leveraged to solve collective problems or maintain the well-being of a community. The purpose of this paper is to describe a study of community governance in six local government areas where safety committees were established to provide a community focus to crime prevention initiatives. The study addressed the questions: What evidence was there of 'whole of government', 'joined up government', and community ownership? To what extent do partnerships strengthen community building and capacity to prevent crime? What roles do the local stakeholders play in decision making? What factors inhibit or promote successful community governance?

Introduction

In a paper addressing a change in the ways in which governments relate to their communities, the OECD (2001, p.13) stated that:

“Improving governance- the way society collectively solves its problems and meets its needs- is at the core of government strategies to reconcile economic prosperity, social cohesion and environmental progress. In a framework of good governance, government services across administrative levels co-ordinate their activities in order to enhance the global effectiveness of policies and minimise conflicting action. Civil society and the corporate sector are invited to participate in collective decisions and are encouraged to translate their involvement into concrete initiatives.”

The ways in which a civil society engages in such decision making is a form of community governance. Community governance is concerned with the structures and processes for decision-making, accountability, control and behaviour at a community level. It is concerned with the capacity to function well, that is, the interaction of the human capital, organizational resources and social capital that can be leveraged to solve collective problems or maintain the well-being of a community.

The process of community governance or the means by which a community responds to problems may be uncoordinated or grounded in a network of interested participants but the capacity of various stakeholders to initiate community based action probably relies on some form of collaboration and marshalling of resources. From this perspective community governance is identified by the exercise of authority, accountability to the community represented, stewardship where funds are involved, leadership, and the direction and control exercised in a community.

A stakeholder as 'any person, group or organisation that can place a claim on an organisation's attention, resources or output, or is affected by that output.' (Bryson, 1995, p.5 quoted in (Kiraka, Manning et al. 2004). The important stakeholders may include government agencies, local government,

statutory authorities not-for-profit service providers, sources of finance, the targets/recipients of problem centred programs, and the broader based community of businesses, residents, etc..

Communities are said to be a significant part of good governance because they address certain problems that cannot be handled either by individuals acting alone or by markets and governments (Bowles and Gintis 2002). Interventions should be problem focused, and not dictated by the traditional functional roles of government, (Pollitt, Birchall et al. 1998). Further, if frameworks for cooperation are to be effective, they need to reflect the whole needs of communities and be seen to reflect the priorities of local people rather than being externally imposed.

This approach to community empowerment and building community governance is a fundamental change, a paradigm shift, in assumptions and values about managing community problems. In the emerging paradigm, the values of stakeholder participation and empowerment, community support and integration and access to resources, shifts power from those who are professionals and traditional decision makers to those who are affected by the problems. The government's role is to enable communities to exert choice and control and to integrate activities into community settings and natural support networks and to facilitate access to resources.

In some respects the paradigm shift is one from a traditional government paternalistic approach associated with a 'welfare' mentality to a 'post modern' orientation that emphasizes empowerment and less coercive approaches by government. It can also be seen as at the same time as both 'shifting the burden' of cost, decision-making and risk to communities, and as being directed towards enhancing the well-being of communities.

In this context, one of the initiatives governments have been taking to improve governance is create and support networks of partnerships with a wide range of stakeholders. An example is the Victorian Government's program "Partnerships Victoria" which is intended to encourage partnerships with the private sector in the delivery of services and infrastructure. In the public sector, "Whole of Government" and "Joined-Up-Government." policies are intended to encourage across government collaboration.

The partnerships sponsored by government are intended to facilitate consultation, co-operation and co-ordination. They are also seen as a response to the wish for local participation, a reaction to the "persistence of social exclusion and its associated problems" and policies only weakly linked to local conditions, and as a means to an improved community wellbeing.

The purpose of this paper is to describe a study of community governance in six local government areas where local safety committees were established to provide a community focus to crime prevention initiatives. The study used qualitative methods to address the questions: What evidence was there of 'whole of government', 'joined up government', and community ownership'? To what extent do partnerships strengthen community building and capacity to prevent crime? What factors inhibit or promote successful community governance?

Methodology

A purposive sampling technique was used to select 6 Local Government Areas (LGAs) from those with Local Safety Committees in place. Local Safety Committees were formed to address crime prevention (Armstrong, 2003). The LGAs represented metropolitan and rural areas of high and low socio-economic status. Local Safety Committees were selected as representative of government initiatives to encourage the formation of local networks. Members of these committees included representatives of local councils, police, Human Services, road Safety, VicRoads, local community services providers and community members.

Focus groups were held in local council chambers using a structured interview schedule of 30 questions which addressed issues associated with community governance: leadership, participation, representation, skills, partnerships, decision making/policies /implementation of programs,

accountability, networking and collaboration. The sessions were tape recorded, transcribed and entered into spreadsheets and analysed using basic statistical summaries.

Results

What evidence was there of ‘whole of government’, ‘joined up government’, and community ownership’?

Whole of government refers to partnerships across levels of government and allows functional departments to focus on common problems. Joined-up-government is the sharing of data, information and knowledge across government agencies and community groups. Community governance structures encompass both these arrangements as well as partnerships with other stakeholders including business and community representatives. The term partnerships is used in a broad way in the current context to refer to relationships, collaborations and networks involving LSC members and other stakeholders in community safety.

Participants gave many examples (graffiti reduction, safety at taxi ranks, youth anti-drug programs, etc) of how programs supported by the LSCs stimulated collaboration between agencies.

Gaining access to agency information was difficult due to privacy issues and desires to retain ownership of intellectual property. LSCs had access to community data provided by local councils, some local police crime statistics and several community surveys conducted on behalf of committees. In many respects “‘joined up government’ as far as sharing of data is concerned is growing. The successful LSCs gained access to local area data both through the councils and through the members of their committees. Wider sharing of agency data was limited. The use made of the data depended on the skills and resources available to the Committee.

To what extent do partnerships strengthen community building and capacity to prevent crime?

The informal networks operating between different government agencies represented on the safety committees were one of the most successful outcomes. They were evident in the ability of the committees to obtain resources, the functioning of committees and the level of activities.

What factors inhibit or promote successful community governance?

The statements of LSC participants (Table 1) showed that in successful LSC, the most effective committees were chaired by a someone who was a ‘champion’, and comprised of dedicated people acting in a collegial way, achieving outcomes through networking and bringing the resources of their departments together in combined efforts to address a problem. The “Champion” was sometimes a local member of parliament but more often a local councilor.

The successful functioning of a LSC depended on collegiality, regular contact, and acting as a network; the acceptance of diversity of views, co-ordination of activities, using the skills available; having access to knowledge of emerging issues; having clearly defined objectives for action and people on the committee prepared to work.

The factors which prevented the development of successful governance were the opposite of these.

Table 1. Contributors to successful community governance identified by respondents

Key Aspect	Local Safety Committee Participant Statements
Collegiality	<i>The greatest success of the committee is to be comprised on like minded and dedicated people, to be of sufficient seniority as to make things happen without needing to get lots of external approval, and the collegiality evident in the group Committed people on committee (likeminded).</i>
Informal Networks	<i>Talk to one another</i> <i>Regular contact with each other.</i> <i>Main responsibility: acting as a network, swapping ideas and information, acting as a sounding board for ideas.</i>
Skills	<i>Ability (members of committee have high level positions) to influence policy at state level.</i> <i>Skilled people with on ground experience in community health.</i> <i>Committee have research capacity and speak from an informed position.</i> <i>Knowledge of emerging issues.</i>
Diversity	<i>Diverse views may lead to conflict but shared information of network is vital.</i> <i>Coordinating and including multiple community groups and safety committees (Emergency services, Education department, Vic Roads) into LSC.</i>
Action	<i>General willingness from each of the parties to input and take responsibilities for action. It is no use sitting around the table discussing things if no-one is prepared to do something.</i> <i>People around the table are prepared to work, nobody just comes along for the ride.</i> <i>We want the committee to be more than a talk fest, we want it to be action orientated</i>
Support	<i>Driver: what we are trying to achieve being clearly defined</i> <i>Strong council and police support at a high level</i> <i>Having the research team here to listen</i> <i>Ability to reach relevant authorities</i> <i>Knowledge of what groups exist to direct problems to</i>
Funding and Resources	<i>The biggest barrier to achievement is funding</i> <i>The Government require all LGAs to have a local safety committee, but do not give commensurate funding.</i> <i>Some people that get funding don't know how to manage funding. Need co-ordinator to avoid duplicating, reinventing existing resources</i>

Conclusion

The conclusions were that the LSCs are very effective in generating networks of people. They had input into local government safety plans, and were able to bring diverse resources together to successfully tackle local issues.

Limitations to their success was lack of leadership, infrequent meetings, lack of objectives and lack of seniority in the members of participating partners.

From a governance perspective the committees were very successful in generating local whole-of-government partnerships with state government agencies in their local communities. Partnerships with the wider community was limited and there was little awareness of the involvement of wider stakeholders such as CPV. As far as joined up government was concerned, data sharing was limited.

The whole of government approach was successful in bringing together different government departments to address community problems. Community governance was evident in the shared decisions between government agencies. Its potential for shifting responsibility to local communities for local problems was limited in so far as, unless local council was significantly involved, the decision-making was dominated by government agencies and involved few community stakeholders.

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