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Title: Managing Community Governance: Determinants and inhibitors

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Managing Community Governance: Determinants and inhibitors

Abstract

Community governance is about 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 and enhance the well-being of a community. The purpose of this paper is to describe a study of community governance in six local government areas which identified the factors that inhibit or promote successful community governance.

Key words: Community governance, partnerships, capacity, social capital, well being

Introduction

The ways in which a civil society engages in decision making is a form of community governance. Community governance is concerned with the structures and processes for decision-making, accountability, control and behaviour of community based organizations.

Much social theory that focuses directly on communities (Mill 1963; Weber 1978; Marx and Engels 1989) suggests that the governance of a community, its institutions and organisations contribute to the social capital of the community and that participation in the governance of a community is an important component in the continued survival of democracy. People have the right to exercise a choice in the kind of life that they wish to live and to have the opportunity to fulfil their aspirations. If a democracy is to function effectively, policy decisions should provide this choice and provide this opportunity.

Bowles and Gintis ((2002) use the term “community governance” in place of the term “social capital” claiming that it better captures aspects of good governance and focuses attention on what groups do rather than what people own. According to them (p.5) : Communities are part of good governance because they

address certain problems that cannot be handled either by individuals acting alone or by markets and governments.

There are many definitions of the term 'community'. Researchers have referred to geographic area, social attributes and interests (language, custom, class or ethnicity) and functional units considered 'natural political units' for the delivery of goods and services and around which collective action can be mobilised. They provide a context of physical space and are recognised as units of identity and belonging for residents. Local Government Areas (LGAs) in Australia are at the centre of these functional aspects of community and are the focus for the delivery of many government programs. For this reason, they are regarded in this study as representative of their local communities.

The ability of a community to respond to problems and, indeed, to take advantage of government policies and resources is termed its community capacity. The attainment of a level of community capacity is mediated or constrained by conditioning influences (perceptions of safety, residential stability, density of acquaintance, structure of opportunity, patterns of migration race and class dynamics, distribution of power and resources) and strategies to enhance or maintain capacity (leadership, organisational development, organizing and organizational collaboration).

Community capacity is what makes well functioning communities function well ((Chaskin, Brown et al. 2001). AS Chaskin et al (2001 p.7) concluded from their literature review:

Community capacity is the interaction of human capital, organizational resources and social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of that community. It may operate through informal social processes and/or organized efforts by individuals, organizations, and social networks that exist among them and between them and the larger systems of which the community is a part.

Networks, which Chaskin et al identified as the social capital component of community capacity, have also been designated as the central element of The Australian Bureau of Statistics' (ABS) framework for measuring social capital (Davis and Grazyk 2002). Networks are groups of people connected by past or present interaction. The composition of networks are the relationships with family, friends, acquaintances and organisations. Norms and values, including trust, reciprocity, self reliance and acceptance of diversity, enhance the functioning of networks. Size, density frequency and communication modes, links to people in power and social and civic participation are indicative of the dynamic relationships found in networks.

Davis and Grazyk argue (2002, p.2) that “the level and mix of resources and the ability to deploy resources in an optimal manner influence the extent, strength and diversity of an individual’s or a community’s networks and their capacity to achieve individual or community goals”. More resources do not necessarily mean a better level of social capital. It is the combination of factors (resources, networks characteristics) and dynamics (bonding, bridging and linking relationships) and contexts, which determine outcomes.

Potential outcomes can be positive or negative. Positive outcomes are community and personal improvements in well-being (physical, emotional, material) safety, community cohesion, and productivity. Negative outcomes are indicated by lack of bridging networks or inclusiveness, corruption, community breakdown, and crime.

Furthermore, if policy decisions are to be effective, the co-operation and not the antagonism of people is needed. The success of community based initiatives depends on the response of a community. The process by which a community response occurs is called community governance. It 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.

This approach to community empowerment and building community capacity is a fundamental change, a paradigm shift, in assumptions and values about managing community problems (Nelson, Lord et al. 1996). 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 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. Local Safety Committees grew out of police initiatives. This paper reports the results of the qualitative methods used to address the questions:

What evidence is there of the development of networks and partnerships?

To what extent do partnerships strengthen community building and capacity? What evidence was there of ‘whole of government’, ‘joined up government’, and community ownership? What determines community governance? What factors inhibit or promote successful community governance?

Methodology

A purposive sampling technique was used to select 6 LGAs from those with Local Safety Committees in place. Because the purpose of the study was to examine the “in-ground reality” of community governance, it was important to choose areas where the Safety Committees were active. 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 is there of the development of networks and partnerships?

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.

According to one LSC member, partnerships are formed by:

committee members who come from health and welfare agencies, police, education, residents, council, emergency services and local businesses.

Similarly, another member said that:

We do a lot of work in building up relationships and partnerships. Accountability is strong and probably due to the broad representation of members – over 20 individuals/organisations are involved (the participant recognised this as an element of success).

Another member commented that the LSC:

Creates partnerships – it is a great conduit for drawing together stakeholders. Partnerships with

LSC members also have the practical benefits as suggested in the following statement:

We work in partnership and utilise expertise of LSC members in the development of specific programs/projects.

The theme is further exemplified in the following statements:

*LSC is about identifying issues in community that affect safety and about **allowing input from other sectors**, for example multi-cultural sub-committee.*

*LSC represents a valuable **networking** opportunity to promote some of the issues that have been identified.*

If the committee was run more as a council committee it would be a loss. It should be a network

*We try to bring together anyone with an interest in promoting health and safety in this area so that we are **working together** rather than in parallel to each other.*

*..Benefits of the LSC is that **agencies come together**. The **combined knowledge base** of the various groups is important.*

Among the objectives of community governance is to build partnerships that strengthen community building and capacity. 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.

Joined up government

Joined-up-government refers to sharing data, information and knowledge across government agencies and community groups. Gaining access to agency information is always difficult due to privacy issues and desires to retain ownership of intellectual property

LSCs have access to community data provided by local councils, some local police crime statistics and several community surveys conducted on behalf of committees. In response to the question: How well do LSCs understand the needs of local communities? Information needs were reflected in the reply:

We need data on what needs to be done, especially since some things are more about perception than reality.

Some of the problems were reflected in the comments:

It is a question of who owns it?

and:

Some people do not share information.

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.

What determines community governance?

In the context of this research, successful community governance refers not only to individuals skills and the resources of community organizations but also includes leadership, the informal networks operating between different government agencies represented on the safety committees, the ability to obtain resources, the functioning of committees and the level of activities.

The most effective committees were chaired by a someone who was a ‘champion’ gathering resources from their council, generating a lot of enthusiasm from members and chairing committees which were active, met regularly and felt a sense of achievement.

The research also found that successful committees received support from local government and were formally accountable to the local council for their activities.

The statements of LSC participants (summarized in Table 1) showed that a successful LSC is 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.

Table 1. Key Aspects of Community Capacity Identified in the Research

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.</i>
	<i>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>

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. In two committees, the level of activity of the committee was driven by the local government safety officer who was highly active in providing information, developing plans and driving the committee agenda

There was a consensus that funds were short and more could be done with access to more resources. (This latter problem could be addressed by LSCs taking advantage of the opportunity to apply for funding from the recently announced \$20M Community Building Initiative announced by the Federal Government).

What factors inhibit the development of successful community governance?

The factors which prevent the development of successful governance are the opposite of what was described in the context of building community capacity. Lack of: a successfully functioning committee, committed members with insufficient seniority to make decisions on committee activities, frequent

networking, resources to support co-ordinate activities; knowledge of emerging issues, or a clear idea of what was to be achieved.

Without clear objectives committee members gradually dropped out or would be replaced by junior staff . This compounded the difficulty of gaining a consensus between agency representatives and decisions about joint approaches to resolving complex community problems.

Various other problems and barriers to success were also identified in the research including the:

need for more access into ethnic communities, given the high proportion of ethnic people in the community.

The profile of the members (90% born in Australia) also suggest that the ethnic communities are not well represented on the committees. A broad perspective is important to take into consideration the needs and perceptions of a community.

If the LSCs membership is to be composed exclusively of government agencies, then direct community representation may not be necessary. However, the membership appeared to be shrinking in some areas and consideration could be given to widening the membership to include not-for-profit service providers who often have a role to play in addressing crime prevention.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to add in depth knowledge about community governance to draw some conclusions about the factors which inhibit or enhance governance structures.

The conclusions are 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.

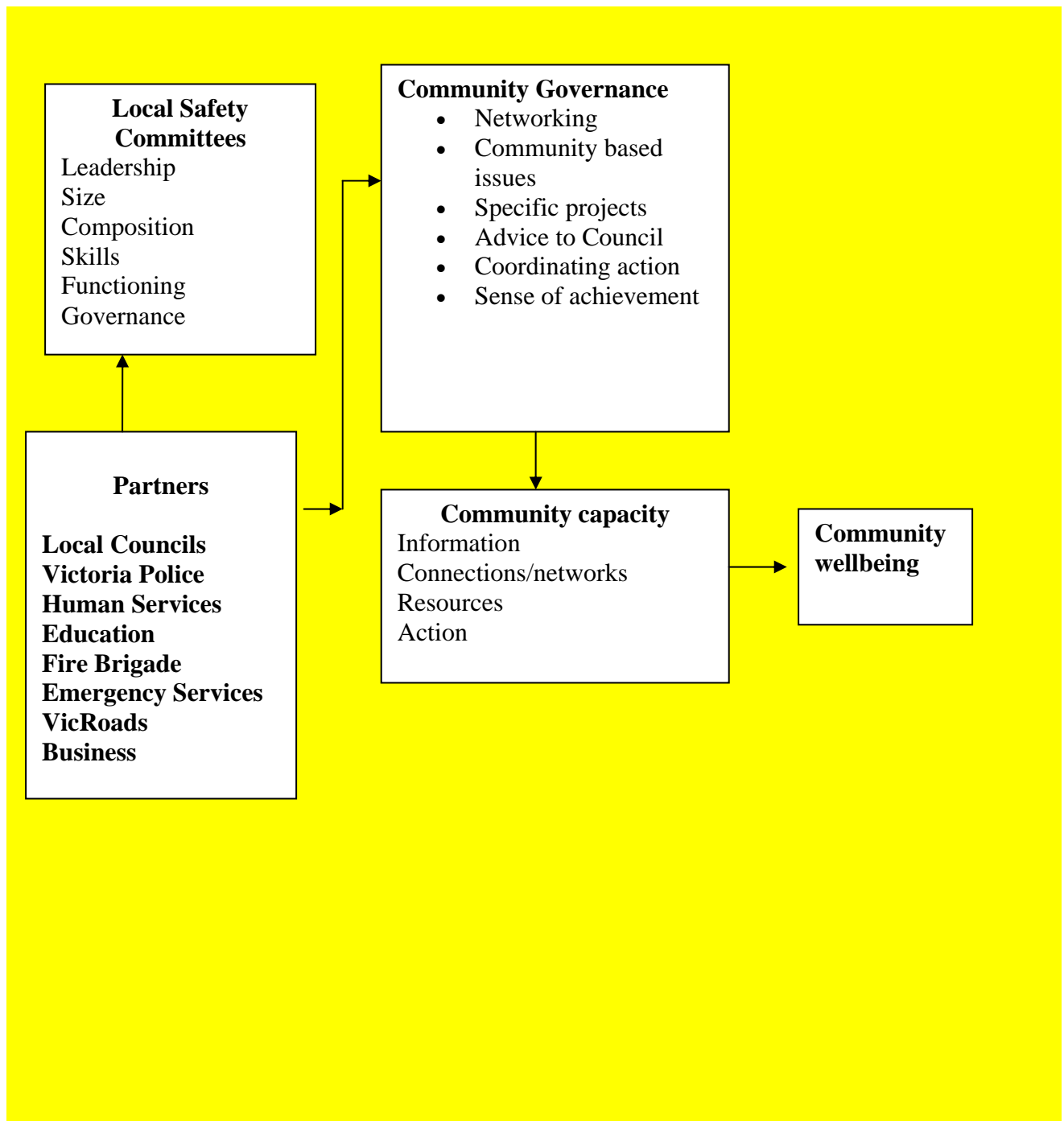


Figure 1. Community governance operating in Local Safety Committees contributes to community well-being.

Limitations to their success were 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.

Community capacity in the context of this study referred to access to networks, access to information and resources and community outcomes. The successful functioning of a committee was influenced by leadership and support from local councils. The greater the investment of the time of the local safety officer, the greater the immediate outcomes. These included networking, input into Local Safety Plans, advice to councils, co-ordination of efforts by the agencies, addressing some specific safety projects and a sense of achievement by members.

Where the latter was missing, committees lacked focus and some members felt frustration at the lack of action. The more successful committees had better communication with their communities and formally reported to their local councils. Reporting to networking partners appeared to be informal.

Figure 1 illustrates the relationships between the LSCs, their immediate outcomes and the longer term aims of promotion of community well being. These relationships will be explored more fully in the next stage of the project.

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