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Community engagement

Community engagement – beyond tokenism

Community engagement sounds like such an active enterprise—engaging with a community, presumably to satisfy its needs. Elsewhere Barbara Chappell has defined the term. If we think about *genuine* engagement we would have to extend our thinking beyond more passive forms – i.e. beyond anticipating customers' needs or evaluating the delivery of services designed to meet those needs.

What interests me as a researcher, a consultant, an advocate and a teacher is community engagement that is not tokenistic. It is not simply about sharing information, or listening to opinions via a survey or focus group, it is about partnership with communities to engage them in joint *decision making*. Inevitably this leads to empowerment which is not something that can be given to a community but something that can emerge when conditions are conducive to its emergence.

We have a tendency towards democracy but we rarely are given opportunities for practising democracy. Local, state or federal government too often undertake only token consultation then act unilaterally *for* the community. In places where democracy is practised, the results are inspiring. Let me give an Australian example.

The Western Australian Minister for Planning and Infrastructure, Alannah MacTiernan, has convened more deliberative, democratic processes than anyone I know. She has done this with the assistance of a very capable process designer, Janette Hartz-Karp. Together they have organised citizens' juries, deliberative surveys, deliberative forums and more; bringing together a cross section of a population, having lengthy discussions that are moderated (so that everyone is heard), and importantly, that the decisions made by the group are acted upon. When the Minister promises to act on their decision she does so. She convenes these projects on matters as diverse as locating a town hall, building a roadway or addressing a pollution challenge.

Frances Moore Lappé has said: "To save the democracy we thought we had, we must take it to where it's never been". People like MacTiernan and Hartz-Karp are doing that with considerable success – stretching our understanding of community engagement. They respect the views of the wider population, beyond special interest groups, and they push those views beyond the gathering of public *opinion* to an exercise of public *judgement*. There are many other Australian examples of small citizens' juries being convened by government and non-government organisations and examples of large scale events that have influenced political decision making. Many local and international examples can be found on websites (you can start at <http://www.activedemocracy.net>) falling under the umbrella of *deliberative democracy*.

Dr L. Carson
The University of Sydney
l.carson@usyd.edu.au

