Participative Policy-making and regional-level strategic planning in Australia and USA

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The Global Financial Crisis (GFC) is putting pressure on government service delivery responsibilities throughout the world.

This paper provides a comparative analysis of the participative policy-making approaches utilized in Canada, USA and Australia, and their impact examining the development of social capital and civic engagement. The role of third sector organisations is explored in this context, particularly the potential for tension arising from conflicting roles of advocacy and government funded service provision. It is proposed that a high level of social capital in a community will predispose to effective civic engagement and participation. This in turn is more likely to result in cohesive and appropriate policy.

Background - Participative democracy is the foundation principle of The British Columbia Strategic Plan, Oregon Shines and Tasmania Together. To be effective participative democracy requires the engagement of a significant proportion of community members. It was Putnam in his study of civic traditions in Italy who identified the links between civic engagement and community embeddedness, developing a composite definition of social capital that included both elements (Putnam, 1995). Social capital and civic engagement increase cohesion in society and experiences of general wellbeing and relevance. Civic engagement and social inclusion are the building blocks of successful third sector organisations. Participative democracy theory rests on the assumption that a compliant electorate with a low level of awareness of civic issues is an indication of a low level of democratic participation (Sabatier 1986, Dryzek 1994). Engagement and transparency in government have been recognised as a significant priorities for government and the Premier in particular as this will develop raised levels of participatory democracy.

Putnam's definition of social capital is process-oriented, nominating 'social networks, norms, and social trust' as the locations for mutually beneficial coordination and cooperation (Putnam, 1995, 67). This results in enriched civic engagement. SC emanates predominantly from the community [or third] sector, but is also produced in market and state sectors. Hogan and Owen describe social capital as residing in 'individuals, social interactions and relationships, institutionalised practices, organisational arrangements and patterns of community life' and dependent on the identification of reduced transaction costs as well as increased productivity (Hogan and Owen, 2000, 81).

It is clear that there are considerable benefits in achieving high levels of social capital, both material and social. Importantly, social capital has been found to contribute to the accumulation of the commodities, being:

...the cumulative benefits such as knowledge, services and influence, arising from networks and interactions that accrue to individuals, groups of individuals and communities. (Alessandrini, 2006 b)

The Global Financial Crisis has brought the role of community into sharp focus with the capacity of the state to provide the range of services and social support now significantly diminished. Revenue collection has declined sharply and announcements of reduction and trimming of state sector budgets are frequent. A grassroots community institution in Tasmania -Tasmania Together- has the potential to encourage and facilitate community engagement and active participation such as social entrepreneurship. How effective has this strategy been when compared with strategic planning projects driven by government? Tasmania Together since its inception has been globally recognised as innovative and unique in its process and outcomes because of its inherent bottom-up structure. The third sector has a vital role to play in such a strategy as organizers and co-ordinators of expressions of dissent and concern, and as advocates for emerging policy preferences.

REFERENCES


Sabatier, Paul A. (1986) 'Top - down and bottom - up approaches to implementation research : a critical analysis and suggested synthesis' in *Journal of Public Policy* vol. 6(1).