

# **NATIONAL HOUSING CONFERENCE**

## **CIVIC RE-ENGAGEMENT - PARTNERSHIPS WITH THE COMMUNITY**

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When trying to discuss a topic as broad as “Civic Reengagement - Partnerships with the Community” there are two immediate problems. The first is about definitions of community. In this case I want to focus on the community of residents who live in public housing estates, areas where residents are often socially excluded. However to approach residents in public housing estates as being a single community with similar interests is fraught with difficulty. The impact of broad economic and social issues may be manifested in the behaviour of individuals or households and it is here that the interests of the community may be at cross purposes.

The second problem is that many of these people have never been “engaged” in the first place. Often residents arrive on the estate because there is nowhere else to go. Their experiences of government employees are often negative: to get an allocation of housing they may have gone through a personally intrusive and frustrating process. They may consider that they have little in common with their neighbours except sharing an address. Groups of residents sometimes form spontaneously in response to problems they experience with the area. But they often face difficulties in engaging others whether residents or external agencies, to help them deal with the problems. Often however residents remain isolated and disgruntled - not the most fertile ground to seek engagement.

We should not overlook the problems of engaging socially excluded communities. There are many barriers which need to be overcome. Residents are often negative about living on estates and who can blame them. Life is often tough. They may feel unsafe and be afraid to mix with others. If they have a multiple problems the daily grind of dealing with these may sap energy and enthusiasm and leave little time for participating with other residents. As well they may feel trapped in a situation which they initially considered temporary but has now become permanent.

Lifting the dead weight of social exclusion is not something that can be achieved for communities. Social exclusion may be measurable by a broad range of indicators but the experiences of residents are crucial in defining how it impacts on them and therefore what needs to be fixed. It is not enough to be providing opportunities to reduce social exclusion, it is essential that we all work to ensure that the mechanisms to move from exclusion to inclusion take account of the needs, preferences and aspirations of residents. We need to work with them.

We all have experience of the services that were provided on estates but never used. The community facilities that were meant to accommodate service providers but lie empty. The tenant participation meetings that did not move beyond a core group of grumbling residents, some of whom will never believe that things can get better. The implementation of rigid government programs that reflected the priorities of politicians and bureaucrats rather than the local communities that they represented. Working in partnership with

Residents is central to the process of reducing social exclusion. Indeed to do otherwise is to reinforce it.

Residents need to have both opportunities and the capacity to use them to their best advantage.

This is a big ask of many public housing communities. Clearly the level of participation that this may involve is beyond that required in communities where social exclusion does not occur. Writers such as Putnam have charted the decline of civic engagement in a range of western countries. Why should communities who have been shut out from the privileges afforded to other citizens have to fight to have their needs heard? It is reasonable to expect that agencies can get together and agree on priority communities for action. But statistics can only take you so far. It is not likely that government and agency workers will know what to tackle first and to understand the specific activities that can make a difference.

There are also dangers in expecting that communities will have the capacity to resolve structural issues. Problems such as unemployment have their roots in the development of a global economy. However it is not helpful to use this as an excuse to not take action on these very complex but very significant issues. It is a fine line between understanding the causes of problems and allowing them to define solutions. With an understanding of the changing nature of employment towards part time and casual work, away from manufacturing and towards service industries and with help in accessing training there may well be opportunities to respond to the changing nature of the employment market. With training and a little experience there may come confidence and a willingness to take the next step whether that involves further education or the first tentative moves to establish a small business or a capacity to become involved in other community ventures. I do not pretend that this is easy or quick but it can work because the problems are broken down into achievable chunks.

None of this is possible without the development of partnerships between agencies, between agencies and residents and between residents.

In New South Wales the Department of Housing has invested in community renewal strategies on a range of large public housing estates since 1995. The problems associated with large estates are particularly pressing for us because nearly a third of our housing stock is located on estates of 100 dwellings or more.

Initially our approach was directed towards improving the condition and amenity of the assets and addressing some of the physical access issues on estates. The limitation of this approach was recognised quite early. Addressing physical problems is very costly. Fixing up houses made people feel good for a while but the estate still functioned poorly and residents were still very disadvantaged compared to other public tenants who didn't live in estates.

More recently the approach has become multi-pronged. While improving the condition of the housing stock is still a priority this is balanced by strategies to improve our housing management on estates, better access to a range of services such as community health and policing, strategies to reduce the impact of large concentrations of publicly owned and managed housing, better access to employment opportunities and most importantly developing ways to improve the capacity of residents to have more control over the decisions that are made about the estates and to improve the connections between residents.

Our thesis is that any one of these strategies on their own will be insufficient to achieve long term change in communities which are socially disadvantaged. We believe the mix of appropriate strategies will vary from community to community and that priorities should be largely informed by resident views.

Allocating funds to things which are not priorities for residents risks causing further alienation. From a purely financial perspective imposing physical improvements without resident input will result in lack of ownership and may lead to vandalism. If this happens a view amongst the housing workers that the estates are full of people who are undeserving is reinforced. Resident cynicism is then further entrenched as housing workers retreat in defeat. Not done properly community renewal can exacerbate problems rather than resolve them.

From the perspective of residents there is a range of criteria which any development process needs to satisfy:

Residents need to feel confident that they have the range of skills that will mean that their input is listened to. Some may need to improve their understanding of meeting procedures while others may need to work on their communication skills so that the real message is heard.

Many of the processes we invent can be alienating. Often there are expectations that there will be more democracy in tenant participation than in any other process we are involved in. The requirement for elected representatives while useful in the long term may turn people off attending meetings for fear that they will suddenly be asked to represent the views of everyone in their block or street. Others may welcome this as an opportunity to represent their personal views as having general agreement amongst residents. We need multiple ways of getting tenant input besides very formal tenant consultation mechanisms.

Tangible gains are required to ensure that participation is ongoing. Many of the goals and priorities of communities are complex and difficult to achieve. It is important that short term priorities as well as long term goals are part of the work plan. There is nothing like a few shared successes to build a level of trust and confidence.

Different views need to be accommodated. Conflicts between residents and changes in power relationships need to be dealt with. It is almost inevitable that some residents will take a prominent role in community building processes. This can be difficult for others who may have different views but less confidence in expounding their position. It is extremely important that housing workers don't only respond to the squeaky wheel. This can unintentionally spark conflicts that take too much time and energy to resolve.

Residents will want to know the boundaries within which they can have input. Whether we tell them explicitly or not, residents will realise that there are some decisions and issues that they can't have input into, such as housing management decisions about individual tenancies. It is far better to be up front about the boundaries for input into decision making rather than to alienate people by letting them believe that they can have input into things that they can't change.

There are also issues for agency staff and we need to develop new skills. We need to come to terms with the fact that the resident's priorities may not line up with ours. Often we feel most comfortable working on the things that we know we can fix. But for residents the priorities are likely to be the problems that cross agency boundaries and by their very nature are complex and fraught with problems.

A good example of this is the reaction of residents on a major public housing estate to the New South Wales Drug Summit. Most were sick and tired of the problems associated with the use of drugs in their area: the syringes left in common areas for the cleaners to remove each morning, the drug dealers who preyed on their children, the crime they experienced which was drug related as users worked out how to finance their next fix. Not surprisingly many of the residents lined up with the most conservative of anti-drug campaigners. We know there are no quick fixes to this issue and that the values and beliefs of agency workers have an impact on their level of enthusiasm for taking up particular strategies supported by residents.

Many agency staff find it difficult to explain agency boundaries and the fact that they have no control over the effort and the interest of their colleagues from other agencies.

One of the greatest problems in community renewal is that it is difficult to synchronise the time frames for achieving a broad range of goals. Community development is a long process and may need to predate major work on the physical form of the estate by a significant period. Yet there is currently no common view in government that this form of research and development funding is a good long term investment.

Some funders continue to have concerns with the use of renewal funds for building community skills and connections because this reduces the physical improvements that can be achieved. There remains some scepticism about community development and a fear that it will mirror the sometimes

unfocussed and “anything goes” approach which characterised much community development in the seventies.

This is exacerbated by the difficulty in measuring outcomes and the sometimes tenuous link between outputs and outcomes. However if we can reduce the broad goals of community development into some more specific objectives the linkage between activities or outputs and their results is easier to account for.

For example if we stop trying to identify measures for community empowerment and opt instead for some simpler and more identifiable objectives such as the support community members provide for each other or the take-up of opportunities by community members we can and should be able to provide meaningful and measurable information on the progress of initiatives.

Working with communities is not for the faint hearted. Residents in socially excluded communities can often smell hypocrisy at 50 paces . Agency workers may be confronted by racist and sexist attitudes of a minority of residents. It is often difficult to remain respectful and responsive to the individual when their views are so challenging. Values and attitudes towards young people and parental responsibilities may also be vigorous ground for debate. In the end its important that we approach working in partnership with residents with honesty and that we take time to deal with divergent views. The relationship between partners in this approach is crucial to its success.

Developing successful partnerships doesn't happen quickly and it is not resource neutral. But without this process of civic engagement or reengagement there are major risks that strategies will be off the mark with a possibility that funds will be wasted. We all hope, residents and agency workers, that the focus on estates will be transitory because the results of our joint efforts to reduce social exclusion are successful Already we are seeing some evidence that this is happening and we need to spread our joint understanding about how to do this through mechanisms such as this conference. But we also need to recognise that this process is an effort that needs to be supported over many years, an investment that needs to pay off for everyone but especially for the people who live there. If we are in here for the long haul then we had better improve our skills in engaging residents because I am convinced that we can't do it alone.