STRENGTHENING GOVERNMENT AND COMMUNITY
THROUGH GENUINE PARTNERSHIPS
Submitted to Local Government Manager
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In Australia as in America, local governments tend to think of their jurisdictions as places and people with needs. They seek to address these needs by relying on tax revenues and bureaucratic expertise. Such a top-down approach may be appropriate at times, but it is certainly not sufficient. If government treats people as nothing more than customers, they think of themselves as ratepayers rather than citizens. This, like amalgamation, contributes to people's sense of alienation from their government.

Moreover, government and its partner agencies can't address all of the needs on their own. Needs are growing more rapidly than government resources. And, increasingly complex social and environmental issues can't be resolved by agencies in the absence of community even if they have unlimited resources.

Some local governments are beginning to recognize that their communities have untapped resources as well as unmet needs. They are empowering and partnering with their communities through programs such as bottom-up planning, neighbourhood matching funds, and participatory budgeting. Consequently, people are starting to identify as citizens and see the government as an extension of themselves. Not only are many more resources available to address local needs, but the solutions tend to be more creative, holistic and appropriate. It's amazing what is possible when government takes as much interest in its democratic infrastructure as it does in its streets, parks, and regulations.

Steps to Effective Partnerships

Building true partnerships between government and community isn't easy. Before they can empower the community, agencies must first cease the harm that they inflict on community and begin removing their own obstacles to engagement. Three major steps need to be climbed in order to get to effective partnerships:

<u>Do No Harm</u>

Ironically, in their sincere effort to help the community, government and other agencies often do it a disservice. They impose their own agenda which distracts the community from its priorities. They don't sufficiently value the time and contributions of the citizens who do get involved so that they are less likely to participate in the future.

Most egregiously, agencies tend to violate the Iron Rule of community organizing: "Never do for people what they can do for themselves." Agency leaders often speak for the community. They provide services that were formerly the community's responsibility. They foster dependence by funding community leaders.

I'm not necessarily arguing for fewer or smaller agencies. There clearly are needs in communities that are best served by government and other agencies. And, most agencies don't have enough resources as it is to adequately address those needs. Agencies should focus on what they are uniquely capable of and allow communities to do what they do best.

Remove Obstacles

It is extremely difficult for the community to partner with agencies as they are currently constituted, because agencies aren't accessible. Government offices are typically located far from where many people live and open during the same hours when most people work. Specialized language and bureaucratic procedures make it challenging for people to participate. Community volunteers can't possibly be involved in the totality of their neighbourhood, because every aspect of the neighbourhood (e.g. public safety, parks and recreation, human services, public health, housing, economic development, transportation, arts and culture, etc.) is associated with a different agency, each with its own staff, meetings, plans and programs.

Government tends to be both too centralized and too segmented to relate to communities. Top-down decision-making doesn't accommodate the community's voice and cookie cutter programs and regulations don't respect unique neighbourhood design or community culture. Professional experts often discount the wisdom of communities, and they work in silos that make it difficult for them to share the community's more holistic perspective.

Build Capacity

When agencies start to make room for community and to remove obstacles to partnership, the next step is to assist community in rebuilding its capacity. Agencies must be careful to do so in ways that empower the community and don't lead to further dependence. Appropriate capacity-building roles for agencies include leadership development, assistance with outreach and networking, and programs such as those described below that encourage the community to identify and utilize its own assets.

Hallmarks of Effective Partnerships

There are three hallmarks of effective government-community partnerships. When they are in place, they allow government to do what my former colleague, Henry Moore, described as "leading by stepping back."

Neighbourhood/Community Focused

Effective partnerships are locally based rather then centralized. They are focused on whole neighbourhoods or communities rather than on separate functions. Consequently, the community can easily participate and the resulting actions are both integrated and

culturally appropriate. Following are some tools that have been used to help government move in this direction:

- *Seattle, Sydney and many other cities have established little city halls in neighbourhood business districts, shopping centers, libraries or other decentralized locations. Not only do these facilities enable citizens to access a wide range of city information and services in one convenient location, but the coordinator for each little city hall also serves as an overt double agent, helping both government and the community to accomplish their goals by working together.*
- *Many cities have established interdepartmental teams with a neighbourhood focus. The City of Toronto, for example, has organized 13 Neighbourhood Action Teams "to support integrated City service planning and delivery from a neighbourhood perspective."*

Strength-Based

Effective partnerships begin by focusing on a neighbourhood/community's strengths rather than its needs. These underutilized resources include the gifts of every individual, voluntary associations, the built and natural environment, economy, and culture.

- *Seattle developed the Neighborhood Matching Fund as a powerful incentive for communities to mobilize their strengths. The City provides cash for community-initiated projects when matched by an equal community contribution of cash, volunteer labor, and/or donated goods and services. Over the past 20 years, the City's $50 million investment has leveraged $70 million worth of community resources, more than 4000 projects have been completed, and tens of thousands of citizens have worked together to make these projects possible. The program has since been replicated by Wodonga, Port Phillip, Sydney, Wyong and other cities throughout the world.*
- *Involving All Neighbors is a Seattle Department of Neighborhoods program that involves persons with development disabilities in community life by focusing on their gifts and connecting them to existing community initiatives.*

Community-Driven

Finally, and most importantly, effective partnerships should be led by those who will live with the outcomes – the community. It is not enough to decentralize services or to mobilize underutilized resources. The community must have a voice in deciding how those resources can best be used.

- *In the late 1990s, Seattle gave communities the power to create their own neighbourhood plans. The community could define the scope of work and use city funds to hire a planner who was accountable to them. In return, the city insisted that all stakeholders be involved in the effort, that outreach be targeted at labeled groups, and that the entire community be given the opportunity to vote on the final plan. The 38 neighbourhood planning efforts involved 30,000 people and resulted in over 5000 recommendations. Broad-based community ownership of the plans meant that the city was held accountable for implementation. Equally*

> *important, the community took responsibility for those recommendations that it could best implement.*

- *Following amalgamation in rural Golden Plains, Victoria, farmers were picketing Town Hall to protest inadequate services. Local officials had very few resources, so they turned to the only untapped resource they could find – their community members. In 2000, they involved one quarter of the municipality's 16,000 residents in the creation of 23 community plans. The plans resulted in the identification of 120 priorities; 600 citizens volunteered to manage the implementation of these recommendations. Thanks to broad ownership, the community and government together found ways to implement 96% of the plans' priorities. The Golden Plains Council subsequently received the highest citizen satisfaction rating of any local government in Victoria.*

- *Other cities give communities a strong voice in developing the government's budget. In St. Paul, Minnesota, neighbourhood representatives draft the city's capital budget. The city budget of Puerto Allegro, Brazil is based on widespread neighbourhood-level discussions.*

Of course, the community's voice must be broad-based. Too often, self-appointed leaders, whose mouths are bigger than their constituencies, claim to speak for the community. Government has a role in insisting that the associations with which it partners be democratic and inclusive. Government should also provide associations with the training, technical assistance, and other support they need in order to adequately represent the community.

- *In Taiwan, the federal government supports Community Empowerment Centers throughout the country and a Young Community Planners Program that provides in-depth training for aspiring activists.*

In my travels throughout Australia – from Hobart to Newcastle to Perth – I have been impressed by the genuine commitment to community on the part of so many elected officials. That provides a solid foundation, but more is needed. Although it is laudable that so many municipalities are implementing programs of neighbourhood planning, for example, most of the planning is not sufficiently decentralized or community-driven. Some local governments are doing a great job of using surveys, focus groups, and task forces to solicit citizen input, and they are also working hard to implement the resulting plans. That isn't enough. Neighbourhood planning can be a wonderful tool for gaining broad and inclusive citizen engagement, for building a stronger sense of community, and for tapping local knowledge, skills, and other resources in both planning and implementation, but those benefits will only be realized when communities are empowered to develop their own plans. Getting local officials to take that leap of faith is a major challenge everywhere, but I have hope that local governments in Australia will lead the way.