

# Community Agency and Community Engagement: Re-theorising Participation in Governance

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## ABSTRACT

Interest in participatory governance recognises that communities can make valuable contributions to governance, but attempts to strengthen community participation encounter obstacles theorised as failures or incompleteness of participatory governance. This paper offers an alternative approach, drawing on ethnographic field data from a decade of work in rural Australian communities. It shows the nature of the community agency that is at the heart of policy interest in participation and how it differs from government efforts at community engagement. These insights suggest a need to rethink participatory governance, not as a single process with multiple participants, but as the juxtaposition of different ways of governing. Doing so opens up the possibility of governments and communities working together in new ways, with governments not only valuing what communities can contribute in theory, but also recognising how diverse communities work in practice.

*Key words:* *participatory governance, community engagement, rural development, Australia*

Public policy increasingly recognises the value of communities and their ability to create social and economic change. Policymakers now look to local energy and community creativity to partner in delivering services, identifying needs and opportunities, and as drivers of a new paradigm of place-based and participatory development (see e.g. OECD 2006). The theoretical assumption underpinning much of this interest is that communities of people, however defined, possess *agency* in the sociological sense: that is, that they have the ability to act and be agents of their own development. Community ideas, energy, social capital and local knowledge are now seen to be key ingredients for solving a range of entrenched policy challenges and achieving a broad range of goals from economic prosperity to social inclusion (Adams and Hess 2001; Yanow 2003; Wiseman 2006). Yet in the meeting point between these public policy aspirations and the agency of particular communities, contradictions inevitably emerge. These contradictions reveal a need to review and re-theorise what is meant by participation in governance.

Beyond the participation of citizens as individuals, there is a growing interest internationally in the participation of communities of people in the formulation and/or implementation of policy. These may be communities of interest and/or communities of place; but frequently the focus is on place-based communities, given their locally situated knowledge and the policy insights that this local knowledge can provide (Yanow 2003). The last decade or so has seen a growing attention to the role of *place* in public policy and administration (Eversole 2009; Parker 2008; OECD 2006; Walsh 2001), at least in part due to a recognition of the deficiencies of traditional centralised bureaucratic arrangements (see e.g. Scott 1998). Increased public-policy interest in communities and community-based initiatives (Everingham 2001; Botsman and Latham 2001; Taylor 2003; Mowbray 2005) has, in turn, most typically focused on local-scale communities of place. The neighbourhood, the town, the rural or urban community, as sites of regular social interaction among groups of people, have been recast as potential agents of development. Places, including problematic places (the rural, the disadvantaged, the marginalised) are thus characterised as *communities* that can potentially be strengthened, built, renewed, and encouraged to help themselves.

The underlying discourse is thus very much about community *agency*. The argument is that place-based communities, with a bit of help and encouragement from enabling public policy, can create their own development trajectories. This interest in communities as a source of policy ideas and action echoes a broader trend in social theory that emphasises dispersed agency over centralised social structures (see e.g. Long 1992; Hinchliffe et al. 2007). It also resonates with economically-focused work in regional science that provides evidence that locality-specific attributes may create different development trajectories and difficult-to-replicate sources of economic advantage (see, for instance, Storper 1997; Cooke and Morgan 1998; Bryden and Hart 2001). And this interest in community-led change is echoed in the literature of both assets-based community development (e.g. Kretzmann and McKnight 1993) and rural development (see e.g. Chambers 1983; Blackburn and Holland 1998), which emphasise how local communities can mobilise their own assets and perspectives to solve entrenched development issues.

For rural communities in particular, these ideas provide a ray of hope in a theoretical and practical landscape that has long seen rural decline as a structural phenomenon over which rural communities were assumed to have little or no control. The theoretical shift away from a strict structuralist understanding of rural development trajectories has drawn attention to the diversity of rural communities and how communities may determine their own future. Of course, this focus on community agency does not negate the importance of structural forces such as capitalism or globalisation,

but it does provide a useful counterpoint to the victim trope that has long characterised academic studies of peasant and rural societies, and led to the invisibility of rural social actors (see e.g. Attwood 1997). A theoretical shift from rural communities as victims of structural change to rural communities as change agents still risks reifying the rural community as a place-bounded and internally homogenous entity – neither of which is an accurate description (see e.g. Amin 2004; Eversole 2003a). Equally, it may overemphasise the amount of influence that communities actually have, and downplay their real needs for external assistance, coordination and support (see e.g. Keare 2001). Nevertheless, acknowledging agency at the local community level has served as an important corrective to top-down views of social change.

For public policy, this growing recognition of local community agency has had a strong, if somewhat contradictory, influence. First, it has created a strong instrumentalist argument for the value of community participation in governance: specifically, the advantages of tapping into multiple agents and their diverse knowledge sets to collectively tackle complex policy problems in multiple places. Growing calls for participation (in policy making and/or implementation), for community engagement, for public-private partnership approaches and decentralised governance, all share a broad recognition that agency to create change exists beyond government, in and across heterogeneous landscapes, among multiple actors. This has typically meant government engaging with civil society via formal partnerships with third sector organisations, often for devolved service delivery. It has also included formalised partnerships between different tiers of government (see e.g. Geddes 2000). Increasingly, however, these participatory relationships include new institutional arrangements such as youth forums, user groups, area committees and other forms of collaborative governance arrangements designed to create more direct engagement between government policy and particular groups or communities (Newman et al. 2004). The idea of participatory governance thus becomes a key policy aspiration: by involving the insights and energies of diverse actors, participatory governance arrangements bring the valuable agency of communities to energise and inform the ongoing business of government.

At the same time, expanding communities' role in governance has created a difficult public policy challenge. It has revealed a deep tension between the traditional hierarchical ways of organising that characterise government bureaucracies, and the mandate to create more networked, horizontal interactions with diverse groups outside of government (see e.g. Burau and Kjær 2008). The question, seen from inside the institutions of government, thus becomes how to reach communities, engage them, work with them and encourage their participation. This is no small challenge. It implies creating relationships in what are largely unknown social spaces,

with communities who may be seen as hard to reach (see e.g. Brackertz et al. 2005), to foster dialogue and participation. The common policy metaphor of engaging communities is telling: *community engagement* becomes a process of seeking out, reaching beyond the comfort zone of colleagues and offices to initiate new kinds of relationships. It is important, but it is not easy.

Improving how governments work with communities is a significant policy concern internationally. This can be seen for instance in the UK government's strong focus on developing and strengthening local partnerships as mechanisms for both increased managerial efficiency and local democratic renewal (Sullivan and Skelcher 2002; Lowndes and Sullivan 2004), and the OECD's recent work on public participation (see e.g. OECD 2004, 2005, 2009). There is a growing interest in moving from shared service provision to include service co-design, and from consultation to deliberative processes that allow for a greater depth of community involvement in decision-making. Yet while there are numerous efforts by government to work with and engage communities, it is equally true that in practice these attempts are often incomplete or even failed (see e.g. Head and Ryan 2004; Jessop 2004; Newman et al. 2004). Research that explores the shape of new government/community relationships in depth in particular settings concludes time and time again that collaboration, participation and community engagement often occur in a way that makes little sense to communities and fails to meet their real needs (Singleton 2000; Mowbray 2005; Cheshire 2006; Teague 2007; Taylor 2007). This raises the question: What can be done to improve the way that governments work with communities?

It is here that an anthropological approach may help to see this problem in a new way. Anthropology's core methodology of ethnography is 'grounded in the detailed observation and interpretation of the ongoing lived experiences of particular individuals and groups' (Arce and Long 2000: 8). Ethnography focuses on people's own views and conceptual categories – the so-called 'emic' perspective of cultures from within (see e.g. Slikkerveer 1989: 22): whether it is the culture of a rural community or that of a government organisation. Thus, ethnography provides a vehicle for seeing and understanding the different perspectives of different groups of people and making sense of their interactions. By exploring the language, concepts, and on-the-ground relationships that characterise government and community actors in real settings, an anthropological approach allows us to understand the nature of community agency and the contradictory ways that it is often framed in both public policy debate and day-to-day practice.

The paper starts by briefly reviewing the way that relationships between governments and communities are presented in the public policy literature. The key insight here is that public agencies, structured bureaucratically, seek engagement with communities, but community institutions are structurally and culturally different from formal institutions of government, and they have

different ways of governing. Community agency as seen in the actions of rural Australian community members is very different from the way it is framed within the practice of Australian governments' community engagement efforts. Ethnographic fieldwork in rural Australian communities in three states suggests that governance is not a single process in which communities are, or are not, adequately engaged by government and do, or do not, see themselves as equal partners. Rather, these observations suggest that governance is comprised of different processes, instigated by different actors for different reasons, both in and out of dialogue with public agencies. The final section of the paper explores how participation in governance can be re-theorised using this ethnographically grounded perspective.

### *The Public Policy Frame: Participation as Co-Governance*

In the public policy literature, *governance* describes a transition from formal, hierarchical authority emanating from bureaucratic centres to informal, negotiated authority (Pierre 2000: 3). This negotiated approach recognises the agency – and in turn the potential value-add – of organisations, communities and individuals that sit outside the formal political and administrative structures of government. Burau and Kjør (2008) observe that citizen participation and co-governance have emerged as a significant policy strategy in Western countries, based on the proposition that citizens and governments provide services and policies more effectively together (see also e.g. Marsh and Rhodes 1992; Kooiman 1993; Head and Ryan 2004; Kisby 2007; Sørensen and Torfing 2008).

These ideas reflect a number of significant normative values: such as the value of civic participation in a democracy, the legitimacy of people's desire to have a say in decisions that affect them, and the push for governments to be more responsive, reflexive and accountable. In the UK, for instance:

'Public, particularly social, policy has become permeated with requirements (some statutory) for user involvement in policy planning, management, and provision. This stands in sharp contrast with the past.... Participation has now been put at the heart of health, social care, regeneration, housing and education policies....' (Beresford 2002: 266–7)

The normative value of participation is typically manifested as political pressure for more participatory processes. At the same time, there are important instrumental drivers of participation: co-governance may bring greater policy coordination, as well as access to community energy, knowledge, buy-in, and popular support: all of significant value to policy-makers. Involving communities in governance processes may potentially create significant policy efficiencies: lowering transaction costs, avoiding errors and generating 'qualitatively better source of policy ideas and processes' (Adams and Hess 2001: 15).

This new understanding of governance as a networked, participatory process involving communities and civil society is placed in counterpart to the old rigidities of bureaucratic frameworks (Considine 2005). Governance has been 'hailed as a new social-scientific paradigm, a new approach to problem-solving that can overcome the limitations of anarchic market exchange and top-down planning in an increasingly complex and global world, and as a solution to the perennial ethical, political, and civic problems of securing institutional integration and peaceful social co-existence' (Jessop 2004: 143). Tim Reddel (2002: 58) summarises new forms of governance as characterised by 'innovation, negotiation and transformative partnerships', with knowledge exchange, democratisation and decentralisation of decision making key to this new way of working. Bringing a range of communities and institutions into the processes of governing is thus painted as an egalitarian win-win situation: it not only gives these diverse communities and institutions a voice in decision-making, it mobilises their agency, knowledge, ideas, and networks to solve entrenched policy problems.

Yet while governance is characterised in theory as more networked, more decentralised, and more participatory, a range of critiques argue that the actual practice of co-governance often does not reflect the promise. Ash Amin, writing on the European regional development context, observes that:

'Only too often devolution and local institution building – despite the rhetoric of wresting control away from the central state – comes without any serious attack on the power of defining others, ranging from central government, powerful states and international organizations, to legal codes, metrics and technological standards formulated elsewhere.' (Amin 2004: 7–8)

This disjuncture between the rhetoric of participation and the reality of persisting state control is explored in a range of case studies in the UK (Newman et al. 2004; Perrons and Skyers 2003), Ireland (Teague 2007), Australia (Herbert-Cheshire and Higgins 2004; Mowbray 2005; Head 2007) as well as in developing countries (see e.g. Cooke and Kothari 2001; Cornwall 2000). These studies suggest that the contradictions identified by Amin are alive and well in the troubled fabric of co governance, across national contexts:

'Encourage participation from below but ensure you deliver on the targets imposed from above, even where these are in conflict with local views; engage in long-term capacity building but also demonstrate short-term performance improvements....' (Newman et al. 2004: 218)

Writing on a social economy partnership in Ireland, Teague (2007) finds that while the programme in question had a sound deliberative democracy structure designed to promote a significant level of community participation in decision-making, 'the institutional framework set up to support the programme was more concerned with ensuring that the government

remained in control'. On the one hand, policy makers were quite serious about wanting a high level of community input; on the other hand, the program's management structure was not designed to take community ideas and innovations on board. Such observations highlight the tensions involved in encouraging participation while retaining strong state power (Jessop 2004; Newman et al. 2004; Bureau and Kjær 2008). As Taylor (2007) observes:

'...new governance spaces are still inscribed with a state agenda with responsibilities pushed down to communities and individuals at the same time that control is retained at the centre, through the imposition and internalisation of performance cultures that require "appropriate" behaviour.' (Taylor 2007: 314)

We thus see numerous examples of strong state administrative structures attempting to build partnerships and networks to enhance public and community participation, yet without compromising their essential identity as hierarchical organisations. Even as new networks are created, old ways of doing things persist. New institutional relationships are created, without de-institutionalising established ways of working that may quickly undermine these new relationships (Lowndes and Sullivan 2004: 67). Governments simultaneously embrace participation – and resist it (Beresford 2002: 267–8). The language becomes one of government and community working in partnership; yet communities are wary (Beresford 2002: 268).

Articulating *government* and *community* as somehow separate entities (who need to work together) may seem odd in the context of a representative democracy, where government is intended to represent communities. Yet the distinction recognises something important: governments have their particular institutional forms and organising principles, and communities have theirs. This difference in the institutions through which governments and communities work may provide clues as to why participatory governance is often so difficult in practice. Different institutional settings have different rules of engagement which may serve to include or exclude particular groups or perspectives (see Lowndes et al. 2006):

'Those invited to participate on other people's institutional turf not only start out at a disadvantage (they do not necessarily know the rules of the game) but they are also likely to end up disenchanted with the promise of participation.' (Eversole 2010: 8)

To overcome institutional barriers to participation, there have been a number of experiments creating innovative new institutional arrangements that are neither wholly owned by government, nor wholly owned by communities, but occupy a new participatory governance space in between. Some are small-scale innovations such as the establishment of youth or neighbourhood deliberative forums, others involve larger-scale participatory planning processes such as those seen in Porto Alegre or Kerala (Fung and Wright 2003). These new participatory governance arrangements highlight that the

institutional context of participation matters. Specifically, they suggest that new institutions might be needed to overcome the tensions involved in attempting to implement networked, participatory governance within the context of established and often deeply hierarchical government institutions.

*Ethnographic Perspectives: Participation and Governance in Australian Rural Development*

Stepping outside an explicit public policy frame, this section explores local perspectives on participation and governance from rural Australia. These are drawn from ethnographic fieldwork on rural development projects and processes conducted in rural towns and settlements in three Australian states over a period of ten years (2000–2009). From this long-term process of participant observation, conversation and documentation across multiple projects in multiple rural settings, a particular set of themes and concepts emerged around the relationships between government and communities in rural development. These are explored here in detail, as they have particular bearing on contemporary public policy debates about participatory governance.

Methodologically, an ethnographic research project does not necessarily begin where it will end up; thus, this research did not set out in 2000 to explore government-community relations. Rather, the initial research interest was to observe and understand rural development (or as it is most typically called, *rural and regional development*) in Australia, using an ethnographic approach. This approach implied an ongoing involvement in rural development projects and processes over a period of time, giving ample opportunities to observe as a participant, learn from local experts or key informants in different communities, and begin to internalise the language and concepts from the different groups and individuals involved. Academic positions within university rural and regional development centres (one in Western Australia, one in Victoria, and one in Tasmania) permitted this interaction and interchange over a significant period of time.

Ethnography's chief advantage is that it permits us to look at processes from inside: to see the cultural contexts within and across which development projects are played out, and which influence how different actors (both individuals and institutions) frame issues and responses. It is a methodology strong on depth and nuance; its disadvantage, however, is that it sacrifices in breadth what it achieves in depth. Most ethnographic studies are specific to a particular group of people in a particular place, and it is therefore hard to generalise from them; ethnography struggles with the issue of representativeness. In this study, I have drawn data from a cross-section of rural communities in three very different Australian regions. This does not achieve scientific representativeness but it does begin to suggest a

set of themes which can be generalised beyond a single local context. The examples presented here were selected as typical examples of themes that appeared over and over again in different fieldwork settings.

The research employed methods of participant observation and conversations with key informants: people who understood and could provide perspectives on their local contexts. It also included the collection and review of written project and policy documentation (proposals, meeting notes, emails, reports, etc.) for analysis as to the language and approaches used. These research processes were carried out across a number of discrete projects about specific rural development issues (e.g. population, enterprise, industry, services, education, planning, etc.) and/or with particular rural groups (indigenous communities, rural towns, youth, women, businesses, service providers, volunteers, etc.). The goal was to understand how different people and groups in different rural Australian settings talked about and acted on the rural development issues that mattered to them.

Working with practitioners in government agencies at state, regional and local levels and reviewing the formal language and documentation of the agencies themselves, revealed governments' strong interest in engaging and working with rural communities. Observations confirmed that spatially based policy initiatives have mushroomed across Australia since the late 1990s (Smyth, Reddel and Jones 2005: 1), and the policy thrust has been very much toward helping rural communities to help themselves: what Cheshire (2006) refers to as self-help rural development. While there is no explicit rural development policy in Australia (Sher and Sher 1994), in practice, the focus over the last decade has been to provide resourcing or partnership arrangements to grow or develop rural communities' problem-solving initiative, community cohesiveness, vibrancy, leadership, and/or self-governance capability:

'Increasingly, governments and development agencies are recognising the importance of communities rebuilding from the 'bottom up' and 'inside out' rather than the traditional model of 'top down' and 'outside in'. They are implementing a range of community facilitation, technical assistance and funding schemes to foster rural renewal.' (Kenyon and Black 2001: 2)

Typical government rural development initiatives observed during the fieldwork included activities designed to help rural communities reinvent themselves economically (Eversole 2003a), as well as those explicitly intended to decentralise governance processes to regional or local levels (Eversole and Martin 2005). They included providing funding for communities to undertake consultant-facilitated visioning and planning processes; encouraging the establishment of progress associations or other voluntary local economic development or community promotion groups; offering competitive grants for community-based social, cultural, economic or natural-resource-management

initiatives (sometimes administered through quasi-governmental regional development organisations); and encouraging communities to engage with government and participate in governance processes via membership in management committees, task forces, consultative groups and other policy-design or policy-implementation bodies.

When speaking and working with rural residents and local community groups outside of government, on the other hand, their perspectives on rural development were typically quite different. Government rural development initiatives were present on the landscape, but only very sparsely, for those fortunate enough to land a grant or be invited onto a project. At the same time, there was a much broader landscape of local initiatives that were actively creating rural development outcomes, often with little or no government support. These included innovative micro and small businesses, dynamic community groups, and informal networks of local people working together. Residents of many rural towns spoke of, and took pride, in their culture of local problem-solving and working together to generate positive change: the term ‘can do’ community was frequently used (see e.g. Eversole 2007), as was the image of supportive communities providing social and economic safety nets to local people. Eversole and Scholfield (2006a, 2006b) documented a number of innovative collaborations among social service agencies in rural Victorian towns, driven not by government, but by individuals at the local level. While in some cases, these individuals were in government-funded professional roles, the activities they initiated to fill the gaps in available services were done outside of these formal roles and motivated by community mindedness.

In each state, the fieldwork provided ample evidence of the can-do attitude of rural people. Often this was mobilised through volunteering; a common observation was that ‘Things get done by volunteers’. Particularly in the smaller rural towns, the sense was often that volunteer effort was the only way to provide anything extra: thus the upkeep of many local facilities was typically provided by formally or informally constituted volunteer groups, and festivals and special events were driven and organised by volunteers, as were new initiatives to improve services such as community banks or community enterprises. Individual initiatives and informal networks were also important. Support structures for young people, for the aged, and for those in crisis were often internalised in rural communities through informal networks of friends and neighbours. While some formal supports existed, there was a marked tendency to prefer informal supports when they were available.

One of the key themes that emerged from the fieldwork, across projects and local contexts, was the idea that the way communities work was somehow different from the way government works. These expressions were not uncommon, and they seemed to capture an on-the-ground

awareness of a difference that was sometimes framed philosophically, sometimes with veiled frustration. While government support for rural development initiatives was certainly sought after when it was available, there was also a pervasive sense in rural communities that those from government (even local government) were outsiders who did not really understand how local communities worked. Many of these observations were specifically about the role of personal relationships (good and bad), networks, informal arrangements, local shared values, and geographic, historical and cultural particularities in defining protocols, opportunities, limitations, and catalysts for action in rural communities. The assertion that ‘we do things differently’ was perhaps unsurprising when it was articulated by members of Indigenous communities (given the more obvious cultural differences involved); it was, however, also a leitmotif in rural towns, voluntary groups, management committees, and even from coalface public administrators attempting to translate their local context back into the larger organisations where they worked.

A related theme across projects and places was about what government knows: specifically, that government representatives don’t understand or misunderstand rural communities and that they ignore or don’t know what is really happening, or needed, in a particular place. Over and over in rural contexts, local people emphasised that those coming from elsewhere lacked local knowledge, both in terms of understanding the local area and its characteristics (e.g. ‘Our coastal land is not good for agriculture’), and in their ability to understand the interrelated nature of local issues (‘We need to be able to use the natural environment as well, not lock it away’). There was often a sense that policy makers and implementers tackled one sectoral issue at a time (education, housing or environmental protection) but ignored the connections among issues. When rules and initiatives came in from outside, there was often a real fear from communities that a failure to know and understand the local context could damage the very systems and processes that government policy intended to help.

Thus, an important theme across local contexts was the distinction between the way communities work and what communities know, and the way government works and knows. This distinction was a strong part of the rural discourse; and it was also highlighted by government practitioners who lived and worked in local communities. Though this could be dismissed as a simplistic portrayal – after all, the institutional fabric of rural communities and their specific ways-of-doing-things were quite varied in practice – the opposition between community and government ways of knowing and working was a significant theme across contexts. It was affirmed with references to multiple examples, from government economic development initiatives (‘they don’t understand how small business works’) to attempts to consult on rural issues (‘they aren’t talking to the right people’). The way

communities worked certainly wasn't always effective, nor was local knowledge necessarily complete, but the interpersonal, relational contextualised, community way of working was distinguished over and over from the ways that government and its representatives worked.

Equally, there was a recognition from community members that working with government required a significant shift in ways of doing and knowing. Some characterised this as 'how you play the game with government agencies'; recognising this as just one more strategy to access scarce resources. Others raised concerns about what might be involved in playing the game: what might have to be negotiated, and what might be lost? For instance, where existing, informal community networks are working to provide support to local young people, could a formal government mentoring project designed to build community capacity cause more harm than good?:

'I'm afraid that by formalizing this, by paying people to do this, we'll devalue it.... What if you're the auntie, and you're getting paid to be a mentor? And I'm your sister, and I'm doing the same thing informally, but no one's paying me?' (Eversole 2003b: 785)

The way government works frequently became a source of frustration for community members: 'The council has lost touch with what people want – they get carried away with rules and regulations that are unreasonable in the country and don't represent the best interests of the people.' (Quoted in EMRS 2008: 35). Equally, practitioners working at the coalface with communities often struggled with the translation between community styles of working and the need to carry out their own work within a bureaucratic framework. As one practitioner put it:

'What we do is about linking up people, being a resource, building relationships. But we need to be able to evaluate our impacts, what it means for the organisation. What does 'working well' and 'not working well' mean? How do we report on the outcomes of relationships? Can it be done?.. There are people who have lost their positions because they couldn't do it.' (fieldnotes, 2009)

Another practitioner observed that the community sector organisations he worked with were drowning in red tape, with the smaller ones in particular struggling to meet the complex, managerially inspired frameworks and protocols imposed by the government departments they worked with.

Australian policy rhetoric has become one of government engaging communities (DSE 2008; Lowe and Hill 2005: 172), building their capabilities (Reddel 2004: 9) and giving them 'the chance to start planning their own future' (Government of Victoria 2007: 4). Yet ethnographic observations confirm that rural communities, the target of many such policy initiatives, are already capable and proactive. While they value government support, they are also wary of the pressures that are on them to move

toward governments' ways of working and knowing. In the Australian policy context participation and participatory governance have largely translated into the language of community engagement as governments seek to engage communities in governance processes. Yet community engagement approaches tend to work from one direction only: as the government engaging communities. A practitioner from within government reflected that while governments are anxious to engage communities, there are fewer avenues for communities to intentionally engage government: 'They (a community group) came to the state government rather than the other way around. .... The government were reluctant to have a partnership where they didn't initiate it.' (fieldnotes 2006).

As governments work to *engage* rural communities, three sets of consequences can be observed on the ground. First, community engagement instigated by governments is nearly always on governments' terms. Working with government requires by definition entering government space: bureaucratic structures such as boards, management committees, consultative processes, grant rounds, formally constituted projects, and so forth. Here, the nature and scope of any activity is already pre-defined by external policy directives, and situated in the cultural space of formal, bureaucratic government agencies. Communities are therefore required to leave their own institutional terrain and enter government spaces which operate according to different rules. Meanwhile, communities' own ways of working and the institutional arrangements that support them tend to become invisible to government actors insofar as they are not engaged with government. The partnership or project is documented and validated as good community action, while the way communities work and what communities know on a daily basis, outside the limited scope of these partnerships and projects, remain off the radar. Margaret Lynn, writing on Australian regional policy, notes that,

'The problem for many bureaucrats (is)...they expect the bureaucratic accountability model to be a blueprint for community structures, and when it is not, they are prone to de-legitimise the message, rather than to explore the significance of local legitimacy.' (Lynn 2005: 190)

One of the ways that community messages are de-legitimised is simply through their absence.

Second, *the way government works* is often very costly for communities and their members. As governments engage communities in joint processes or initiatives, these require a heavy reliance on volunteer labour over and above their existing, less visible community activities. At the same time, costs are significantly increased by the expectation that volunteers will comply with the requirements of working within bureaucratic structures. Increasingly, volunteers are expected to be trained, certified, licensed and generally possessed of a raft of paperwork that requires time and money to

obtain. Funding submissions are often written by volunteers; compliance with increasingly complex administrative and reporting requirements for government grants is also in the hands of volunteers. While such requirements may be logical and necessary within a bureaucratic framework, they are translated at the community level as the government bureaucracy imposing additional costs on rural communities.

Finally, the way governments engage communities serves to exacerbate social disadvantage. Those groups and individuals who are least able to bear the costs and manage the cultural intricacies of formally engaging with government (writing a funding application, making a submission, joining a management committee, commenting on a draft report) are less likely to engage, and less likely to see any benefit when they do. This is often a deep source of frustration for coalface government workers in rural communities who lament that they need and want to engage marginalised groups, but find themselves unable to do so: only the usual suspects come to meetings and participate. At the same time, the informal grassroots organisations that often provide valuable services and supports to disadvantaged and isolated groups are progressively marginalised and destabilised as new norms about what community should look like take over from old ways of working. For instance, government regulations increasingly require even independent community-based organisations to take on the same governance trappings as formal bureaucracies: permits to work with children, licenses and insurance in order to hold community events, registrations and certifications of volunteers before they are permitted to cook or serve food or climb a ladder. Such requirements not only fly in the face of the ways rural communities have long governed themselves, but they undermine and de-legitimise communities' own forms of self-organisation.

In practice, governments' well meaning efforts at engaging communities may threaten existing local community systems by replacing often functional community forms of governance with less functional or more costly bureaucratic ones. Even when the government actors in question are well meaning in their efforts to encourage communities' active participation in governance, the engagement frame assumes that governments initiate actions, and communities follow. Such an approach privileges bureaucratic institutions as inherently superior to community institutions, and the way government works becomes the standard for effective governance. A telling quote from Tasmania encapsulates the meeting point of the way community works and the way government works from the perspectives of rural land-management volunteers: 'Many people in the small group interview sessions expressed heart-felt frustrations to the degree that they were on the brink of "giving it away" (ceasing their participation) because they don't see that their time is valued, and/or that the bureaucracy has "gone mad".' (L&SR 2006: 15).

How do we understand this level of community frustration in a context where rural communities have strong can do agency and their governments actively seek to engage with them and encourage their participation in governance? The themes from the ethnographic research suggest that these kinds of tensions and frustrations result from the meeting points of two essentially different ways of governing: *the way government works* as a set of bureaucratic institutions trying to engage communities, and *the way communities work* as a set of localised institutions and relationships through which community members engage with each other and outsiders.

When these very different institutional contexts come together, confusion often results. Expectations, values and ways of working are different. Bureaucratic institutions of governance are characterised by authority and control, strong legal frameworks, and the ample availability of paid administrators capable of running an administrative machine. In this institutional context, it is perfectly logical for a good relationship to require signed forms, insurances, reports, audited accounts, detailed and documented procedures, risk assessments, and so forth: they are an integral part of sound and transparent governance. Community-based processes, on the other hand, represent different ways of governing: personal and relational, based on networks of trust and influence, informal rules and norms, enforcement via social pressure, and work done primarily by unpaid volunteers with a personal stake in the outcome. Outsiders who ‘come here and tell us what to do then leave again’ lack legitimacy: they don’t know about the local context, and ‘don’t have to live with’ the decisions that are ultimately made. Even their processes often seem illogical and mad: unduly complicated, inappropriate, unnecessary, and costly.

The solutions to these tensions are to be found in analysing the meeting points between community and bureaucratic institutions of governance. In rural Australia, governments seek to engage communities and communities seek to work with governments, but the way government works is different than the way community works. When the two come together, government-led community engagement approaches frame the interactions on governments’ own terms, creating costs and frustrations for communities, and rendering communities’ existing ways of working largely invisible. Government workers at the coalface in rural communities were often able to see and describe this disconnect. Yet few of these rural-based workers were empowered within their organisations to suggest ways in which community and bureaucratic ways of governing might work together more effectively.

### *Engagement Versus Agency: Re-theorising Participation in Governance*

The idea that local communities and external policy bodies know and work differently has been explored in anthropological literature on international

development processes. Anthropological insights show us, for instance, that centralised, bureaucratic organisations may see problems and potential solutions in particular ways, and that without the locality-specific knowledge of those most directly involved on the ground, policy disasters may result (Scott 1998). The anthropology of development documents how development organisations privilege generalisable, technical knowledge and externally controlled processes, often ignoring local and culturally situated knowledge and practices that are deeply important to local development. Meanwhile, local actors go on creating change, noticed or unnoticed by external policymakers, both inside and outside the formal mechanisms of development. (See e.g. Slikkerveer 1989; Long and Long, 1992; Hobart 1993; Sillitoe et al. 2002).

Similarly, in Australia, we see that rural community members have local knowledge and local ways of doing things and are able to create social change both within and outside the mechanisms established for them by local, state or federal governments. Community members value government resources, but they are also conscious that they have knowledge that government actors do not necessarily share, and that this lack of knowledge on the part of key decision-makers can lead to poor decisions and negative consequences for them. Equally, many rural community members have a strong sense that community ways of doing things – less formal, personal, relationship-based ways – are deeply different from the ways that formal government institutions work. Thus, working with government may yield benefits, but it also implies investing time, energy and resources in learning and complying with what is, in many ways, a foreign culture.

The contemporary public policy interest in participatory and place-based governance posits that local communities are capable of driving change and innovation, and that governing is more effective when governments and communities work together. There is very little debate that what local communities do is very useful from a policy perspective, and that working effectively with communities can be a path to better policy. Yet while public policy increasingly values what communities do, there seems to be little awareness or interest in how communities do it: how communities at the local level mobilise resources, solve problems, and create change. Governments increasingly want to work with communities, but are much less interested in how communities actually work.

The disconnect between the way communities work and the way government works is cultural and institutional rather than merely spatial. When bureaucratic actors at the coalface try to incorporate local knowledge and ways of doing things into development processes, they are often caught uncomfortably between two cultures. As Arce and Long (2000: 211–256) describe in their case study of a Mexican state rural development officer mediating between his local community and his government department, there was a clear ‘opposition between peasant and bureaucratic views of

development', which created serious dilemmas for the local administrator. Aside from the power relations that may well have been at play, the community and government had different understandings of rural development. Moreover, rather than dialoguing or negotiating, community approaches to solving the problems at hand were not even visible through the government's rural development policy lens.

Evidence from Australian rural communities suggests that as communities shift into a relationship with bureaucratic organisations, they begin to adopt bureaucratic ways of doing things. In doing so, they become visible and recognisable within a bureaucratic frame: as engaged participants in rural development processes. The visible face of community agency becomes the face that engages with government. Yet evidence from rural Australia also emphasises that diverse communities have their *own* governance processes, and these work quite differently than those initiated by governments. This challenges the theoretical framing of participatory governance as a process in which diverse communities are, or are not, adequately engaged, and which may or may not be as participatory or inclusive as promised. Rather, it suggests that governance processes are multiple and contestable, as diverse communities exercise their agency both within and beyond the formal organisations of the state. It therefore follows that the observed contradictions of participatory governance are not a form of unresolved tension in governance as a single process; but rather, the logical result of the interaction of different forms of governance. These include the formal, hierarchical approaches to governing that are part of the cultural heritage and persisting organisational culture of state institutions, in all of their diversity; as well as the less formal and contextually specific ways of governing that are the hallmark of communities, in all of *their* diversity.

Policymakers attempt to create community participation, recognising the potential power of community agency to drive change, but rarely seeing or understanding it. They lament the difficulty of engaging with communities, of reaching into an immensely diverse social landscape and understanding either what communities want (in bureaucratically comprehensible language and conceptual categories) or how communities work (bureaucratically mad, unaccountable, disorganised communities!). Policy directives, technical expertise, organisational frames, and administrative requirements all create a socio-cultural context that makes community forms of governance hard to see, and harder to trust or take seriously. People working within government thus tend to see communities through government eyes: as participants or non-participants in processes initiated by governments. The way governments work thus sets the terms of engagement for the relationship (see e.g. Taylor 2007: 302). Meanwhile the way communities work – their agency to mobilise local energy and create dynamic change – intrigues policymakers in theory, but remains largely invisible to them in practice.

Understanding governance as multiple and culturally situated can also illuminate the problems and contradictions of participation in governance more broadly. Unlike a Foucauldian ‘governmentality’ argument, which focuses on governments’ often-subtle exercise of power over communities, the key issue here is that governments and communities tend to see, do, and understand things differently, and this creates issues when they try to work together – regardless of the other factors involved. As Bevir and Rhodes (2008: 81) write, ‘any pattern of governance is a product of diverse practices made up of multiple individuals acting on all sorts of conflicting beliefs which they have reached against the backdrop of several traditions...’ There is a need to understand the cultural bases of these diverse practices and how they differ, and recognise that they include forms of governing that may or may not have a formal relationship to policy. There is also a need to understand the diverse institutional contexts within which these practices are played out, and on what terms they can come together.

In rural Australia, community engagement is a government-led process carried out primarily on governments’ institutional terrain. Communities are encouraged to engage in government institutions and processes, while their own institutions and processes remain invisible. In only a few cases have policy bodies developed new institutional settings for participatory decision making such as place-based resource management bodies. Yet even in these shared, deliberative institutional spaces, the focus, formats, language and guiding paradigms are pre-determined by the policy body sponsoring the exercise: leading to similar kinds of tension and conflict to those described above (see e.g. Craig and Vanclay 2005). Such new governance institutions tend to be sub-sets of the old hierarchies rather than truly shared institutional spaces. Tensions between hierarchical institutions and networked and participatory governance approaches are perhaps most marked in contexts such as Australia and the UK where there are strong bureaucratic government institutions that struggle, structurally and culturally, to accommodate more participatory ways of governing. It may be that younger democracies find it easier to create participatory spaces (see e.g. Gaventa 2004).

By valuing communities in theory but failing to recognise how they work in practice, policymakers saddle themselves with an uphill battle for community engagement, even as they risk undermining existing community capacity. One way to bring these dynamics onto the analytical radar is to theorise participatory governance differently: not as a single governance process with multiple participants, but as a juxtaposition of different ways of governing. Such an understanding of governance(s) as multiple allows us to see the community agency and capacity that is at the heart of contemporary public policy interest in participation. It opens the door for policy and practice to achieve greater community participation and

inclusion, especially for disadvantaged groups, by seeing and finding ways to be engaged more effectively with the diverse ways in which communities already work.

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