Open your council



"...the future of every community lies in capturing the energy, imagination, intelligence and passion of its people."

– Ernesto Sirolli [1]

Les Robinson

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practical tools for citizens

Contents

Making space for democracy

As a society we have long assumed that social virtues like trust, social responsibility, and participation would just look after themselves. In fact Australians are pretty good participators when they get a chance – in sports clubs, child care and P&C groups, for instance.

But we barely participate in the most important thing of all – the shaping of our communities and society – the destiny-building stuff. We have left that too often to politicians, managers and lobbyists.

Our politics has become a lonely business – isolated and embattled politicians, remote managers, withdrawn and passive-aggressive citizens, all communicating fitfully via a cynical and self-serving media which feeds on conflict and misinformation. The result is a political system mired in gridlock and suspicion – easy picking for powerful interests and their lobbyists.

This is no way to run a healthy society. The complexities of life have passed the point where a relative handful of politicians and managers can be expected to make productive or just decisions without the intelligent participation of a larger body of citizens

So we need to start creating spaces where the players in the business of democracy – politicians, managers and citizens – can come together, learn from each other and work positively for the common good.

Local government, the level of government closest to home, is the logical place to start.

An unbalanced government

"There's no room to be heard. There's no space. There's some big gap here."

– Wollongong City resident at a development protest meeting

Think of the things local government provides: public space, parks, patrolled beaches, swimming pools, child care services, senior citizens' centres, halls and meeting spaces, clean streets, hygienic restaurants, garbage and recycling services, the shape and feel of our suburbs, and a whole lot more.

Local government is the custodian of the public realm – the civic and neighbourhood spaces and services which are vital for public and private life.

So why do many Australians treat their local government with apathy and cynicism?

There is a widespread perception that we have no way to defend our communities against powerful forces, that we have no way to be heard by our elected representatives, and that we cannot influence what happens in our own cities and neighbourhoods.

The perfectly natural responses are anger and distrust.

Local government can often seem impregnable in its remoteness.

But without public understanding and support, local government is vulnerable.

It can be manipulated by developers, political cliques and powerful insiders. And it can be 'reformed' by state governments in the name of efficiency, as occurred in Kennett's Victoria and to a lesser extent in South Australia and Tasmania, losing part of its democratic character in the process.

The corporate push

I live in a community administered by Wollongong City Council. Fifty years ago my council had 15 aldermen and perhaps a dozen office staff, administering to the needs of 70,000 people.

Wollongong City Council now has over 900 staff including many highly trained professionals engaged in complex managerial or technical disciplines, each with its own jargon and body of specialised knowledge.

We now have fewer councillors (13) and all are busy people with day jobs. Yet they are supposed to oversee the business of this immensely complex bureaucracy, as well as represent the needs and address the problems of 180,000 people.

In other words, over the last 50 years the managerial side of local government (which is concerned with technical efficiency) has swelled to huge size and complexity, while the democratic side (where the public good is supposed to rule) has stagnated or retreated.

Perhaps the problem of local government at the start of the 21st century is that it is has become a very powerful corporation, but a relatively much weaker democracy.

Before the 1990s local government was mired in inefficiency, laziness and corruption, all facilitated by a fantastic tangle of red tape.

> **"There were so many rules that is was pointless to challenge them. The only way to get anything done was to ignore them."**
>
> – a council officer.

The red tape was blown away in the 1990s by the concept of customer service when councils began to model themselves on businesses with more delegated authority, performance benchmarking, and the idea of residents as 'customers'. The 1993 Local Government Act in NSW and similar reforms in other states sought to redesign councils as corporations focused on the delivery of services. The reforms increased the powers of general managers and narrowed the roles of councillors.

The bureaucratic application of customer service principles redefined citizens as consumers who receive services, then provide feedback through customer surveys.

While these reforms solved some of the notorious inefficiencies of local government, they did nothing to remedy its democratic decline.

Meanwhile, amalgamations over the last 100 years relentlessly eroded the capacity

of councillors to represent their constituents. In the Wollongong Local Government Area, for instance, there were four separate councils before the 1947 amalgamation. This event was followed by years of de-amalgamation campaigns by angry citizens, led by the local Progress Associations, who were infuriated by the new remoteness of local government. There are now 14,000 residents per councillor in Wollongong, by no means the largest local government area in NSW.

It's probably no accident that this retreat of democracy has been accompanied by declining public respect in local government as an insitution.

More efficiency and fewer politicians is probably not the solution to this problem.

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Mayor's lonely vision

Park plan creates discord

By NATHAN SIMPSON

When the community is locked out of decision-making the political system can become mired in conflict.

Breaking down the barriers

"I believe you only get good government where it's a partnership: where you have the involvement of community groups and individuals."

– Cr Jim Soorley, Lord Mayor,
Brisbane City Council

It's easy for citizens to see their council as 'them' – a monolithic unit.

But local government depends on at least three completely different kinds of players:

- elected councillors;
- managers and professional staff;
- engaged members of the community.

When these players mesh together, local government works well. Councillors show courageous leadership because their community actively supports them. Managers take risks because their commitment is recognised by the community. Members of the community have incentives to participate because they are listened to.

But when these players work in isolation, bad government is the inevitable result.

Perhaps the worst pathology of local government is fear and disrespect between the players. When this happens councillors burn out and fall prey to lobbyists and developers. Managers avoid effort and risk and retreat into their disciplines. The community feels betrayed and gets cynical and angry. Bad and mediocre decisions are made and the players are confirmed in their mutual suspicions, prejudice and ignorance.

So perhaps good government depends on four elements: active citizens, responsive managers, courageous politicians, and forums where they can meet each other, interact, and find common ground.

To your cynical citizen of today, this may seem romantic. But this booklet will show there are plenty of places where such democratic spaces are being created.

It's important to understand that once the parties come together they can generate benefits for each other – forming a self-sustaining system. Learning is possible. Councillors and community begin to comprehend legal and technical systems. Managers and professionals learn how to speak the language of citizens and benefit from the common sense and knowledge of people living in real places. Everyone learns valuable skills of negotiation, conflict resolution, and patience.

In recent decades there has been a tremendous ferment of local democratic reform in the United States, Canada and

the United Kingdom. We now have a wealth of inspiring examples which show that this optimistic kind of outcome is possible.

And in the last few years some fascinating experiments have begun to occur in Australia.

A democratic ferment

New democratic initiatives take a surprising variety of forms – all designed to create a special 'space' for informed deliberation by citizens.

Examples include:

- Community wellbeing and environmental audits and 'indicator' projects.
- Precinct and neighbourhood committees, often with sophisticated planning processes.
- Direct democracy processes like citizen referenda (for instance, multi-choice referenda on local budget priorities).
- Citizen juries or investigation panels.
- 'Teledemocracy', that is, online discussions, internet conferences, email voting.
- Study circles: facilitated small group sessions involving learning and problem-solving around community issues.
- Consensus conferences: facilitated large scale deliberation events.

Deliberative democracy

"Demonstrating a truth by a logical argument rather than imposing it is the heart of democracy...Whoever claims that a certain proposition is true has an obligation to prove it, if he or she expects others to be convinced."

– André Joyal [2]

Deliberative democracy is a relatively new idea in Australia, although it has a long history in Europe.

A typical council meeting makes scores of decisions about land developments, local services and local spending – decisions which are almost always about balancing the public good with private interests. This is a tricky business! It's rarely easy. And often the only guidance is a council officer's recommendation to approve, approve with amendments, or reject.

The ideal behind deliberative democracy is that a group of citizens, soberly reviewing the facts, may be better equipped to locate the public good and wisely balance private interests – and do so with greater independence and credibility – than politicians or managers.

'Deliberation' suggests well-reasoned judgments based upon evidence. It also involves a leap of faith by those in power, who need to trust both the process and the intelligence and diligence of ordinary citizens. The many examples of deliberative democracy in action suggest that that trust is well placed.

Eugene's deliberative experiment

Many recent deliberative democracy experiments draw inspiration from the example of Eugene, Oregon.

In 1990 Eugene, population 125,000, had a big financial problem – an US$8 million structural deficit in the city budget. Instead of listening to management consultants and starting the inevitable cycle of downsizing and service cuts, the city council spent US$350,000 to develop community solutions to the problem.

A 12-page tabloid was sent to every household explaining the city's financial situation. It showed six possible solutions ranging from service cuts to new taxes and user fees. A "Build you own City Budget" clip-out questionnaire was included which guided citizens through a four-step process of building their own budget (it was set out like a household budget).

More detailed questionnaires and public

workshops followed and a 10-page summary of results was published.

The questionnaires achieved an unheard-of 71% response rate. In addition the city organised community consultations with small groups of seven to eight people to develop strategies on how to do things. The city also televised the council deliberations dealing with the issues.

As a result of this public engagement, Eugene's citizens rejected a strategy which relied solely on either service reductions or revenue increases – 76.8% preferred a mix of service reductions and new taxes. The City implemented the solution over two to three years.

The Eugene experiment proved a watershed in deliberative democracy in the United States and inspired many other initiatives.

The People's Panel in Brisbane City

Brisbane City Council has become a leader in Australia with its strong approach to community deliberation.

> "Brisbane City Council's mayor, Jim Soorley, [3] was keen to find a way to conduct an ongoing dialogue with his constituents and to develop a consensus on the city's future direction.
>
> "To build this mandate, Soorley and his team invited all residents to be part of an ongoing people's panel. Expecting about 600 responses they were surprised to find 6,500 accepting council's invitation. The entire 6,500 respondents now make up the people's panel or reference group. The group receives regular newsletters that most often include a returnable survey that asks for feedback on different topics, for example the city's public transport system or development along the Brisbane River. The results of any surveys are also reported back via the newsletter to keep participants informed.
>
> "The reference group members are invited to attend community activities such as conferences or public meetings on topical or controversial issues. This educational component is to ensure that residents have as much up-to-date information as possible so that the complexity of issues can be understood. Research groups are conducted as well, using the panel as the pool for focus group participants.
>
> "Soorley's office claims that Brisbane City Council's projects and annual budget have been altered to reflect the community's values. Participants have responded positively to the invitation to have their say – indeed the project is called 'Your City, Your Say'.
>
> "The project has moved beyond opin-

ion polling by involving the community in ongoing dialogue, , in strategic planning via 'Vision and Values' workshops. Soorley believes that while participants continue to be involved, the project can be deemed to be successful. The project is highly dependent on the the city's mayor. There is no obligation to act on the community's recommend-ations although it could be argued that it would be a foolhardy leader who ignored such clear messages from his or her constituents.

"The strength of the project is that participants are provided with considerable information along with the blank survey forms, just as participants are with deliberative polls. It could be claimed that an informed citizenry is responding to questionnaires, presumably having discussed the issues with family and friends. However there is less emphasis on debate or community agenda setting, and more on satisfying BCC's needs – even the focus groups are designed to answer specific questions." [4]

"Our Shire Our Future" in Sutherland Shire, NSW

One weakness of Brisbane City's approach is that the agenda is still being set by politicians and managers.

Sutherland Shire Council in NSW is attempting to overcome this limitation. It's working with its community to create a community-owned vision for council priorities.

'Shape the Shire' is a continuing series of surveys, workshops and seminars and discussion papers which aim to involve as many people as possible in discussing what should be the Shire's priorities for the next 30 years. There is also a monthly 'roadshow' that visits shopping centres to obtain community views.

Regular shire-wide newsletters (some containing surveys) and survey reports are letterboxed to all 72,000 households to ensure that all members of the community have an opportunity to participate.

To date the major outcomes of Shape the Shire have been a Shire Vision and Strategic Plan.

These documents resulted from the work of a core group of about 200 people who spent many hours in a series of workshops, and feedback from 17,000 residents and business people provided in surveys.

Interestingly, the Plan and Vision are based around 12 cross-disciplinary 'Life Spheres' (such as Health, Neighbourhoods, Decision-making, Environment), rather than the usual management divisions (Planning, Health and Building, etc).

These are expressed as sets of indicators so that progress can be reported back to the community.

Sutherland Shire has also been trialing randomly selected citizens' panels, where participants are provided with background reading and invited into focus group-style workshops to discuss issues (such as the contentious nuclear reactor planned for the Shire). At the end the participants are given a copy of the final report with their recommendations. [5]

Purple Sage, a state-wide community deliberation in Victoria [6]

The strength of both the Brisbane and Sutherland Shire projects is that participants are provided with considerable information together with a number of different ways to participate. Nevertheless, the approach lacks genuine community ownership and can easily be influenced by the institutional outlook of the council staff who are providing leadership.

An extraordinary Victorian project sought to overcome this weakness by being entirely independent from government.

In the 1990s Victorians were reeling from the Kennett Government's market-based approach to government: 50,000 public service jobs were cut, 380 schools were closed, rail and tram services sold or closed, the electricity industry sold. Unprecedented cuts were made in education, health and community services. At the same time dramatic attacks occurred on institutions responsible for government accountability – such as the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Equal Opportunities Commission and the Office of the Auditor General.

There was no obvious way ordinary people could channel their anger at this loss of public institutions. With "the daily media extraordinarily compliant, there was an increasing mood of despair and a feeling that nothing could be done." [7]

To give voice to the voiceless, six community organisations, led by the Victorian Women's Trust, obtained funding from the Stegley Foundation to initiate a mass community dialogue to articulate a different vision for Victoria.

Beginning in August 1998, the project eventually involved some 6,000 people in 371 communities, with 600 being trained as group leaders. Small group workshops, group leader sessions, community agency meetings and think tank sessions were held across the state.

The groups expressed anger at the dismantling of public institutions, but the dialogues were also surprisingly constructive.

"There is an acute sense of people unloading a burden:

venting their worries, anger and frustration; registering deeply held values and community attachments. But they also have the opportunity to describe their preferred vision of the future and they do this with pleasure, clarity and a deep sense of humanity and decency."

Issues and strategies were written into an inspiring and informative publication [8] which set out a common vision for a decent and democratic society through 21 guiding principles. Central to those principles was the need to restore integrity to the relationship between voters and those elected to serve on their behalf.

The document introduced the concept of a citizens' "watching brief" to monitor the actions of elected representatives.

The project spawned numerous campaigns on local issues. It also sent interview kits to all its groups to pressure candidates in the lead-up to the 1999 state elections, when the Victorian electorate rejected the Kennett Government, signalling a new direction for public policy away from pure market ideology.

It now seems as if many of the ideas articulated through the Purple Sage Project have been adopted by Victoria's new Labor Government.

Consensus conferences in Denmark and Canberra

"It would be no exaggeration to say that everyone touched by the process has undergone some change. There was awe and truth in witnessing democracy in action that, at least for a while, took away the breath of even the most hardened manipulators."

– Participant in Australia's first Consensus Conference, March 1999 [9]

Once you have established a citizens' panel, you can do more with it than simply hold surveys and focus groups. You can mobilise a representative group of citizens to find answers to problems which are even beyond the capacity of government.

This is the aim of a consensus conference. A panel of citizens is given a problem, for instance, genetic engineering. The panel hears evidence, questions experts, and thrashes out an issue under the guidance of a facilitator. Finally it prepares a report, stating its conclusions.

During the last ten years, the Danish Board of Technology [10] has conducted over 15 consensus conferences on hot

issues like: irradiation of foods (1989); use of human genetic data (1989); the future of motoring (1993); treatment of infertility (1993); assessing the risks of chemicals in food and the environment (1995); sustainable consumption(1996); and teleworking (1997).

The aim was to hear the voice of citizens in technological debates where 'public interest' would otherwise be drowned out by the voices of lobbyists and industry groups.

Australia's first consensus conference was convened by the Australian Museum in Old Parliament House, Canberra, in March 1999. The issue was the genetic modification of foods.

The three-day conference involved a steering committee of 17, a citizen or lay panel of 14, an experts and stakeholders panel of 13, and a facilitator. A publicist was also involved to maximise media coverage (it would be pointless to hold a consensus conference without as many people as possible finding out about it). An audience also participated.

The stakeholders panel included representatives of the agribusiness giant Monsanto, as well as the farming, science, ethics, nutrition, health and manufacturing sectors.

> "Those who excelled themselves above all others were the members of the lay panel. Plucked from all walks of life right across Australia in response to an advertisement for citizen participation, these 14 individuals seized with both hands the chance to contribute, and never looked back. They demonstrated citizens' ability to come to grips with complex issues of science, without becoming 'irrational' or 'emotional' (the two most commonly levelled charges against lay people by experts who shut them out). They demonstrated citizens' willingness and pride in contributing. They demonstrated citizens' doggedness, stamina and perspicacity. And they generated the mind-boggling realisation in those present that if a different lay panel were found to do the same job next week, they would be just as capable." [11]

After three days of intense interaction, the panel made their recommendations, with broad but not complete endorsement from the interest groups.

The recommendations included:

- No new commercial releases or unlabelled genetically modified foods until a rigorous regulatory framework is established. The framework should take into account not only science, but also the environment and the physical, mental and social health of individuals.
- An investigation into multinational monopolies in the food industry by the

Australian Competition and Consumer Commission. [12]

The conference generated more than 160 media stories. Its political impact is less clear, but it may have helped stiffen the resolve of state government health ministers, who over a year later instituted an unexpectedly rigorous genetic food labelling regime against heavy lobbying by food manufacturers and the Federal Government. [13]

The NSW Environment Protection Authority recently commissioned Australia's second consensus conference – on the question of introducing drink container deposits.

Consensus conferences prove citizens are capable of intelligently solving problems which are beyond government – and with a legitimacy which government has lost.

The key to the approach is the creation of a special space for deliberation, where attention to detail is possible and focused debate occurs.

See Appendix 5 What is a Consensus Conference?

The Passion Café in Wollongong, NSW

An initiative by citizens in Wollongong proves that civic deliberations are possible without the expense of a consensus conference.

Disturbed at the politics-as-usual in their home town, a small, diverse group of individuals decided to enrich the political diet.

In 1998 and 1999 they staged two public lectures featuring global intellectuals Robert Theobald (Citizens Reinventing Communities) and John Ralston Saul (Democracy, globalisation, and the global role of small cities). These were immensely successful events, packing out the city's town hall.

They also staged two "Passion Café" workshops, involving more than 300 participants. These were facilitated events, where citizens broke into groups to debate issues and develop a vision for the city's future.

The Passion Cafés produced some media attention, but the absence of resources meant that no attempt was made to formulate an elaborate outcome or continue communication with the participants.

Perhaps the greatest impact was on the participants themselves, who realised that they were not alone in their distaste for the status quo. The Passion Cafés established relationships which led directly to a new political formation of independents who contested the next local government election with considerable success.

Making space for citizens

The common feature of these deliberative democracy approaches is the purposeful creation of adequate time and space for citizens to meet, be informed, understand opposing points of view, debate and intelligently decide important issues for the public good.

Democratic deliberation potentially differs from a conventional "community consultation" because the answers are not known in advance and key decisions have not been made. Ideally, there is an atmosphere of equality, where the force of argument takes precedence over organisational power and authority.

Crucially, citizens take part as citizens, not because they are "stakeholders" with private interests to protect.

Deliberative democracy is claimed to:

- bring out new information and perspectives which may be vital to a workable solution;
- encourage altruism since it is focused on the common good, rather than self-interest;
- encourage people to commit to trade-offs when they are assured that others will do so as well;
- be an antidote to the "stakeholder" approach in which all private interests are considered fixed and immutable.

The obvious weakness of most of these deliberative democracy approaches is that there is nothing particularly democratic about them.

They can be excellent tools to improve decision-making by those in power. But most involve only small numbers of citizens and the public as a whole is rarely engaged. They usually remain the property of the decision-makers who define the process and set the questions to be answered. They a kind of "optional accessory" which operates outside the formal avenues of government, and hence there is no guarantee that the decisions will be acted upon.

Another disadvantage is that they are dependent upon the leadership of ethical and committed politicians and managers – something can never be guaranteed! Without this commitment they may quickly degenerate into hollow propaganda tools (as some recent criticism of Brisbane's People's Panel suggests).

But what if local participatory processes were built right into the structure of government? Let's look at some of the more adventurous approaches of citizen participation in the United States.

Neighbourhood democracy

"Only under a democratic system do people dare discuss new ideas and develop their intelligence and wisdom. If we don't encourage people to liberate their thinking and talk about new ideas, our society will look tranquil on the surface but in fact it will be a pool of stagnant water."

– Bao Xiang 14

Councillor Joe Ross, from Redwood Shire Council in Queensland, felt his precinct committees were failing because the same few faces turned up at each meeting. So he turned the monthly meetings into afternoon sausage sizzles where he could engage with a wider number of people in a friendly atmosphere.

Councillor Ross is the ideal of an intelligent, committed councillor, willing to take risks to achieve a better outcome. But democracy has to depend on more than the superlative commitment of a few individuals.

A stronger democracy needs sustained structural changes which permanently transform the stake people have in government.

The United States, with its early democratic traditions, is among the most advanced in building formal places for citizen participation in the business of government.

Neighbourhood participation in the USA

"I believe people in their neighbourhoods have the best sense of where and how to spend money, plus it has the added benefits of building community."

– Portland City official Steven Young.

We can draw inspiration from the United States experience of linking neighbourhood associations into the business of city govenments.

In the US a range of federal initiatives, starting with President Johnson's war on poverty in the 1960s, sought to solve urban problems in typical American style – through principles of self-help and local self-determination, rather than welfare. The key initiative was a system of federal funding called Community Development Block Grants. But the only way a city

could get these funds was to have a city-wide program of community participation.

Not all these programs succeeded, but those that did have valuable lessons for Australia's growing experiment with participation.

A major 1993 study [15] provided a valuable analysis of five successful US programs of city-wide neighbourhood participation and empowerment – in Birmingham, Dayton, Portland, St Antonio and St Paul.

The remarkable thing about all these programs was that they are not tokenistic programs of "consultation'. They all involve serious sharing of power and responsibility with the city government.

> "In each city the neighbourhood associations are in the middle of some of the most difficult and controversial issues that the city faces: they are asked to balance business and residential interests; solve every NIMBY (not in my backyard) siting issue; meet federal and state guidelines; tackle drug abuse and crime; deal with environmental crises; find ways to meet social service and health care demands; balance budgets; review bond issues; and at the same time respond to the usual array of concerns about parking, garbage pickup, stop signs, and noisy neighbours."

In each of these cities the neighbourhood groups are organised in every neighbourhood and hence cover the entire population. They have independent budgets, regular two-way communication channels with city hall, their own support staffs, training opportunities, technical assistance, neighbourhood offices, and they are empowered to act on behalf of all the citizens and businesses in their neighbourhood.

The cities illustrate a fascinating variety of participation models: [16]

Birmingham, Alabama has a system which involves elections for neighbourhood officers in more than 95 neighbourhood associations every two years.

Each neighbourhood association communicates with its households through a monthly newsletter, decides how its federal Community Development Block Grant will be spent, and works with community resource staff to find solutions to neighbourhood concerns.

Broader "communities" cover several neighbourhoods and a city-wide Citizens Advisory Board is made up from representatives from each of these communities.

Dayton, Ohio has a system of seven Priority Boards whose members are elected by precinct through mail ballots. Each Priority Board covers several neighbourhoods.

The system includes leadership training, monthly meetings between boards and representatives of city agencies, annual neighbourhood needs statements, and a wide range of neighbourhood-oriented planning, initiatives and self-help programs.

Portland, Oregon has a city-wide system of autonomous neighbourhood associations, with seven District Coalition Boards pulling together more than 90 neighbourhood representatives. Each board hires its own staff, works from its own office, and is contracted by the city to provide "citizen participation services".

The boards carry out advocacy, annual neighbourhood needs reports, crime prevention programs, and solve individual neighbourhood problems, as well as advising on the city budget.

St Paul, Minnesota, has 17 District Councils, each locally elected. Every council has a city-paid community organiser and neighbourhood office, but virtually all other efforts come from volunteers or additional funds raised by the council itself. The District Councils have substantial powers including jurisdiction over zoning, authority over the distribution of various goods and services and substantial influence over capital expenditures.

A city-wide Capital Improvement Budget Committee, composed solely of neighbourhood representatives, is responsible for the initiation and priority ranking of most capital developments in the city. The system includes community centres, crime prevention programs, and a newspaper in virtually every district.

St Antonio, Texas, has a system which is independent of the city administration. It is structured along Catholic church parish boundaries and is strongest in the Hispanic third of the city. City-wide conventions, demonstrations, meetings and confrontations with city officials of several hundred to several thousand people characterise its activity, resulting in a highly responsive city administration.

Why did these cities succeed where other US cities failed or merely obtained mediocrity? The study identified the following factors:

- In each case there was a strong citizen push for participation. In the case of Birmingham it was the result of decades of total exclusion of blacks from community and government life. In the case of Portland it was the result of community outrage over an attempt to build a freeway through residential neighbourhoods (the freeway was never built).

- There were clear visions expressed by government leaders. In Dayton, it was the vision of a new city manager who wanted to ensure that failures resulting from lack of consultation in the city where he had previously served would not be repeated.

In Portland, it was the vision of an activist mayor (later to become US transportation secretary and governor) who felt that the existing neighbourhood ethos was an important resource to build upon.

• There was support in the form of federal funds which could only be released when participation systems were established.

Other crucial factors were: particip-ation was based on small, natural neighbourhoods; the systems were city-wide from the beginning; effective information flows and opportunities for policy input were established from the start; party politics was avoided; and networks of community support were decisively established before federal policies changed or key politicians left office (usually requiring 2-3 years of intense negotiation with every citizen group in the city).

These programs succeeded despite stiff opposition over many years from city administrators and conservative political elements. The study concluded that:

> "In contrast to the critics' predictions, these strong participation systems have not functioned at the expense of governability. They do not produce policy gridlock or increased policy conflict. The systems do not seem to introduce racial or economic biases into the policymaking process.
>
> "Instead of chaos, there is a degree of empowerment. Participation in these systems tends to increase confidence in government and a sense of community. Within a certain range of issues, particul-arly land use and planning issues, neighbourhoods generate city policy. High levels of face-to-face participation are linked to increased responsiveness by city hall."

Seattle-style citizen empowerment

Twelve years ago Seattle's then mayor, Charles Royer, decided he was tired of holding public hearings "in which everyone yelled and nothing got done". He took the radical step of hiring a long-time resident activist, Jim Diers, and made him the head of a new department dedicated to neighbourhood empowerment.

In common with many US cities Seattle now has 13 elected district councils, each with its own "Little City Hall" – neighbourhood shopfronts that give people access to city government and help them control their own communities.

An original Seattle innovation is the Neighbourhood Matching Fund. Groups of residents decide on local neighbourhood improvement projects and for every dollar provided by the city, the residents provide a matching contribution in cash, donated professional services, or volunteer labour.

The fund began with $US150,000. It now distributes more tha $US3.75 million each year.

The program began reluctantly (the mayor voted against it) but more than 1400 neighbourhood projects have since been funded – including nearly 100 playgrounds in parks and schools, a youth yacht club, public art, community vegetable gardens, cultural centres, reaf-forestation, restored wetlands, clean-ups and training programs for young people.

According to the current mayor, the fund is "the single most successful City strategy for both tangible projects and a stronger sense of community".

According to city officials, the program dramatically increases the number of people who are active in their communities, it allows community groups to shift from negative positions to taking responsibility for their communities, and it builds a much better relationship between council departments and citizens.

The program is economically rational – it has more than doubled the city's investment in neighbourhood improvement! So far Seattle has spent $US8 million and gotten back an estimated $US20 million worth of volunteer help. [17]

Seattle's success has since prompted more than 40 US cities to establish similar programs. The beauty of the Neighbourhood Matching Fund is its simplicity – it revolutionises relations between city and citizens without having to seriously devolve power or establish any new institutional structures – simply by an act of trust.

But Seattle has since gone much further and fundamentally recast its planning system along participatory lines.

Seattle's Neighbourhood Planning model

Seattle's Neighbourhood Matching Fund made possible the pilot of a revolutionary model of neighbourhood planning which has now been applied to the whole city.

The four-year city-wide program began in 1995. In this program the city provided neighbourhoods (a neighbourhood had to include at least one 'urban village') with up to $US80,000 each to draw up a plan for their desired future shape.

This is how the city's website describes the program:

> "Neighbourhood planning is the cornerstone of the city's Comprehensive Plan – a larger tool for protecting Seattle's unique and vital communities. It outlines a strategy for accommodating growth over 20 years by attracting development to areas with services to adequately support living, working, playing, shopping and learning in the community.

> "Inclusiveness and collaboration are the bases for neighbourhood planning. Community members with a variety of interests and backgrounds work together to chart a course toward the future they want.
>
> "The core values, identified by citizens, are community, social equity, environmental stewardship, and economic opportunity and security."

To take part, each neighbourhood had to create a coalition which represented the variety of local interests.

The first phase involved developing a community vision through meetings (mostly facilitated by a professional consultant) and arriving at a detailed workplan.

In the second phase the planning committee worked through the plan, analysing local problems and developing solutions in collaboration with city staff, and meanwhile communicating regularly with residents.

Each committee eventually produced a widely understood and generally accepted vision for its neighbourhood's future, with concrete steps to achieve it.

About 20,000 citizens invested their time and resources in this massive planning effort.

The City Council checked the plans and eventually accepted 38 neighbourhood plans, which are now being progressively funded from the city budget and local funds.

The plans range from modest traffic control and amenity proposals to sophisticated urban revitalisation plans based on ecological principles. Almost all the plans include strategies for housing, open space and parks and transportation, while many include arts, human services, public safety, economic development and drainage. [18]

To make possible the City's commitment to implement these plans, the mayor decentralised the city government, dividing Seattle into six sectors, directing city departments to decentralise accordingly, and adding six sector managers, to manage interdepartmental teams which are implementing the plans in each sector.

In a breathtaking example of accountability, the City's internet site now posts monthly updates from the Sector Managers tracking the progress in implementing each neighbourhood plan. They make interesting reading.

Community Boards in Christchurch, New Zealand

It's easy to dismiss stronger local democracy as something that's only practical in the American system of government, with its strong traditions of communal self-sufficiency.

The example of Christchurch disproves that.

In 1989 under the influence of an inspired city manager, the City of Christchurch established a system of Community Boards.

The boards were based on the existing system of 12 wards, with the wards being paired to make six Community Boards. Each ward now elects two councillors and three community representatives, giving each Community Board 10members.

With a directly elected mayor, that's a total of 61 elected local representatives for a city of about 330,000 inhabitants (or about 5,400 residents per representative).

Each Board operates out of its own community centre, has a budget of about $A500,000, employs about 6 staff in delivering local services, has its own newsletter, can spend about $A160,000 at its own discretion, and allocates local project funding of about $A400,000.

The boards oversee all capital projects in the wards and can approve tenders of up to $A800,000. They have numerous delegated powers; for example, they exercise all of council's power over local roads; decide on local traffic works (like bus stops and pedestrian crossings); manage parks and reserves; grant community awards; and lease public land to community organisations.

The boards' primary role is to be advocates for their local communities. They review all council policies and management plans and must hold several community forums each year, eliciting community responses on almost every aspect of local government, including capital spending, development and planning, services, sports and recreation facilities, environmental issues, and road safety. All monthly board meetings include time for addresses from citizens about local issues.

Although initially controversial, Christchurch's Community Boards have become respected local institutions.

Judging from the council's annual report and strategy documents, the Community Boards provide Christchurch with the basis of an unusually responsive and interactive local government.

The boards have another healthy outcome – they provide a relatively large pool of tried and tested citizen leaders to bridge the gap between government and people. [19]

Measuring wellbeing

"It's a movement – a community indicators movement which has grown in Australia over the last five years. And hopefully it will work as a democratic, not a technocratic tool."

– Mike Salvaris, Institute of Social Research, Swinburne University, Victoria.

"Social indicators are valuable when they help us tell different stories about ourselves... challenging deeply help assumptions, as well as affecting policy."

– Richard Eckersley, National Centre for Epidemiology and Population Research, Australian National University

In my city, there is really only one measure of success which percolates to the top of the political froth – employment. If our councillors are seen to be "creating jobs" they feel successful. If not, they feel insecure.

This means that Wollongong City Council has long been vulnerable to ill-conceived and speculative developments. A history of major developments imposed on the community with little pretence of consent has alienated many active citizens and created an atmosphere of distrust.

Like many Australian communities, my city's politics need healing and one way might be to bring a more complete set of human values into the city's definition of progress.

This idea is the impetus behind the community indicators [20] movement which has burst into the Australian scene in the last few years.

Measuring progress in the USA

The community indicators movement began in the US and owes its modern popularity to two long-running projects which drew widespread attention.

In 1985, a group of about 100 citizens in Jacksonville, Florida, began to raise concerns about the impact of uncontrolled developments. They decided to develop indicators to measure changes in their community's quality of life.

With funding from the Chamber of Commerce, they created a set of 75 indicators, which has since been updated annually to measure Jacksonville's progress on community improvement.

The project was not picked up by the media until 1991 when the group initi-

ated another project, using 140 volunteers to set targets which the community could aim for, using the indicators to track progress.

The project has since gained national attention and stimulated dozens of similar projects. The committee is now working with the city's government to link the indicators to performance-based budgeting for Jacksonville.

It is interesting to look at some of the indicators used in Jacksonville.

In addition to the usual economic measures, the current set includes:

- Public park acreage per 1,000 population
- Symphony and zoo attendance
- Effective buying income per capita
- Affordability of single-income home
- Public high school graduation rate
- Public school expenditure per student
- Per cent who register to vote
- People accurately naming two city council members
- Infant deaths per 1,000 live births
- Packets of cigarettes sold per capita
- People spending less than 25 minutes commuting
- Average weekday bus ridership
- People who feel safe walking at night.

A more ambitions project was initiated by the State of Oregon [20] in 1989. It aimed to measure the state's progress towards developing a skilled and competitive workforce capable of meeting the city's role at the hub of the global digital economy.

The Oregon Progress Board, with the cooperation of many public, private and non-profit organisations, developed benchmarks for state spending priorities. The benchmarks represent the work of thousands of citizens who participated through public meetings and written comments.

Fourteen community progress boards were created and they adopted the benchmarks to monitor the success of local efforts.

Fourteen US states have since used Oregon as a model for similar comprehensive benchmarking programs.

Interestingly, Oregon's indicators include a series on community engagement:

- Percentage of Oregonians who volunteer at least 50 hours of their time per year to community activities
- Percentage of Oregonians who feel they are a part of their community
- Percentage of Oregonians who understand the Oregon system and where tax money is spent

(All three are trending upwards)

There are now about 200 community indicator projects in the USA and Canada.

The Canadian Parliament is considering a bill for a Canada Well-Being Measurement Act. [21]

Community indicator projects in Australia

Many Australian councils are now initiating community indicator projects. Here are a few.

Newcastle City Council – Sustainable Community Indicators

At the time of writing, Newcastle City Council had just launched its first Sustainable Community Indicators report card.

The report card has 23 indicators, including measures such as:

- Unemployment levels
- School retention rate from year 7 to year 11
- Enrolments in adult education courses
- Increase in the proportion of persons who feel that help is available in a crisis
- Improved regional pollution index
- Community perceptions of safety
- Per capita use of public transport
- Per person waste disposal

and, interestingly

- Perception of opportunities for community involvement in decision-making.

The Newcastle project grew out of the city's council-sponsored Pathways to Sustainability Conference in 1997, itself a product of an enlightened council leadership at a time when the city was beginning to face up to the need for a new identity with the foreshadowed closure of the steel works (since closed).

The indicators project was initiated by the council but had a skilled independent facilitator. The council had a tradition of listening to its community and large numbers of people attended public meetings. A working group of about 15 people met regularly for 12 months and included representatives of business, union, environment, resident and community service organisations. The working group reported its progress to a community reference group of about 30.

The project coordinator, Therese Postma, found the discussions unexpectedly complex: "We thought that household income should be an indicator, then an environmentalist disagreed, saying we should all be content to live in poverty together. This led to some interesting arguments and made people reassess their assumptions. In the end we agreed that income disparity between poor and rich was more important than simple income."

Newcastle City Council will compile and

publish the indicators annually.

Sutherland Shire Council – State of the Shire

In late 1996 Sutherland Shire Council embarked on a 30-year strategic planning process called 'Shaping the Shire'. A Strategic Planning Unit was established to run the project and organise surveys, workshops, public meetings, newsletters and media coverage to support the project.

From the surveys, 12 "life spheres" were developed, each with its own indicators. Finally, after four years, a set of indicators was placed on public exhibition in early 2000, together with the first public report, State of the Shire 2000, which assessed that four life spheres are moving away from the desired vision while eight were moving towards it – the kind of honest admission that can only improve a council's credibility.

Sutherland Shire has 47 indicators which include:

- Perceptions of crime
- Volunteerism
- Incidence of asthma
- Mental health
- Housing affordability
- Housing footprint and landscaped area
- Vegetation cover
- Neighbourhood participation
- Quality of life/optimism
- Public transport passenger trips.

Waverley Council and Port Stephens Council in NSW, Moreland City Council and Cardinia City Council in Victoria, and Gold Coast City Council in Queensland have also established wellbeing indicator projects.

Designing indicator projects

Before launching an indicator project, it's important to clarify issues of ownership and purpose.

First, there is a danger that community indicator projects could be adopted by Australian councils simply because they fit into the managerial mood of the day, with its emphasis on data and benchmarking – the projects becoming "safe" internal corporate affairs,with no community ownership.

Council managers are, of course, especially concerned with financial performance data. But the community's values are far more complex and subtle, being concerned with issues like fairness, a healthy environment, being heard, public safety, and the character of the future communities their children will live in.

If the process is captured by council management, then such values are unlikely to

be expressed. And if the indicators do not measure things which the community values highly, then wider citizen interest and engagement will not occur.

Only when indicators are developed and owned by the community will they have credibility. Fortunately, the process of developing indicators is a valuable community development initiative in its own right: an opportunity for diverse people to come together and thrash out often very complex issues, which require group learning, negotiation and deliberation.

Second, there is little point in measuring present information unless you have an idea where you want to be in future. Data always varies over time. Water quality or employment levels are always going up or down. Perceptions of public safety are influenced by ephemeral media coverage. How do you know whether the changes you are recording in successive years really add up the kind of progress your community hopes for?

Indicator projects therefore need to be linked to community visions. In fact, an indicator project is simply a way of measuring progress towards an agreed community vision. Developing such a widely understood and generally agreed community vision is therefore an important early stage in a meaningful indicator project. The vision sets out the benchmarks against which progress can be charted.

This is the approach adopted by, among others, Sutherland Shire Council.

Linking indicators with council budgets

The limitation with community indicators (and, ironically, the reason why they are proving so popular with councils) is they are politically and managerially safe. There is no necessary link to the most sensitive council mechanism – the corporate planning process which sets budgets.

And yet, community indicators may gradually achieve a measure of influence over budgets because managers need performance criteria and the indicators fill the vacuum.

To conclude, here is some useful advice from the manager of Tucson's Sustainable Communities Program, where the Livable Tucson Vision Program has been adopted by the council as the basis for the city's budget process.

> "Each department must now delineate which of the 17 Living Tucson goals its programs address and how it uses its budget to move in that direction. It is still infiltrating into the operating force of 5,200 employees, but there are encouraging signs. For example, we now see references to 'creating Livable Tucson' in the PR for various programs. The city manager's recent memo on

the five year Capital Improvement Plan says in the second sentence 'this CIP focuses on capital investments that support the goals of the Livable Tucson' (and we did not feed him those lines). We still have a long way to go but feel it has taken root.

"Partially this has occurred by serendipity and partly because the Vision and Indicators filled the void of a comprehensive policy framework. Therefore, I cannot prescribe a fool-proof strategy for replicability, but here are some factors worth considering in other places.

"First, the City of Tucson sponsored the program and therefore had the capacity to convert it to public policy (at least for the issues we affect).

"Second, and closely linked to the first, there were enough City Council members who put themselves on the line to ensure it would not be ignored. It was not primarily a political exercise, but it had sufficient political accountability.

"Third, it did fill a policy vacuum. Even if your community has a comprehensive policy framework, it may be old or inappropriate and therefore susceptible to renewal.

"Fourth, the indicators have been specific enough to overcome the usual suspicion about typical 'Vision' plans.

"But fifth, it did have a large, but accurate enough, vision of the future to motivate people who don't read city budgets."

Focusing on places

Two radical innovations are taking place in Australian councils: "place-based planning" and "place management".

Strictly speaking these are not democratic reforms, but new kinds of local planning and management.

However, they deserve to be considered here because they can be a powerful avenues to inject positive citizen participation into the most controversial area of local government: deciding how communities look and feel.

Traditionally, local planning has been based on a system of zones. Yet these zoning systems are arguably a major contributor to the degradation of the character of Australian neighbourhoods, and for feelings of anger and disempowerment in communities.

The problem is that, for example, "Zone 2 (b) Residential" is the same throughout a council area, in suburbs of completely different character and history. It's hard to argue that there is something special about one area that can protect it from undesirable developments. Further, as soon as one ugly or out-of-scale development occurs, it becomes a precedent that allows more within the same zoning.

It's important to realise that zonings (and their partners, Development Control Plans) define purely technical qualities of buildings and streetscapes, such as number of stories and whether an area is commercial or not. Because they apply across the board, they can't define the things people really care about – the unique look and feel of a particular neighbourhood.

Place-based planning (also called precinct planning), advocated by the prominent urban planner John Mant, intends to overcome these failures. [22]

Sydney's **Warringah Council** has the purest example of place-based planning in Australia. It recently replaced its entire zoning system with a place-based system. [23]

It works like this: Warringah now consists of 64 separate places or precincts. There are no zonings. All development is controlled by a 'Desired Future Character Statement' for each place. The statement is unique for every place, and reflects the desired future of an area, rather than its past mistakes.

Place-based planning can be an empowering democratic tool because the only people really qualified to envision the desired future character of a neighbourhood are those who live in it.

Warringah's place statements were developed partly by a citizens' committee and partly by an extensive community consul-

tation process involving a newsletter, workshops, public meetings and a website. But almost any kind of citizens' deliberative process could be used – the deeper the community involvement, the more effective the 'Desired Future Character' Statement is likely to be.

It is early days yet, but it is to be hoped that the Warringah example is followed more widely, since it provides a potentially powerful tool for translating community desires into bricks and mortar.

Place management in Australia

A closely related idea is "place-management". This aims to reshape government administrative structures around the needs of individual places or suburbs.

This is done by appointing managers who are accountable for outcomes in individual places, rather than broad abstract functions like drainage, social services and roads.

Place management principles are starting to be widely applied in Australia: the Bondi Beach place manager at Waverley Council; the Newcastle Place Manager; place management programs at Kings Cross; Waterloo and Cabramatta (led by the Premiers Department).

One of the most interesting examples of place management is at **Fairfield City Council** in Sydney's south-west. Here place management has been built into an innovative new "City Outcomes" structure.

The city is one of Australia's largest, a "battling" outer suburban sprawl with 190,000 residents, 60% with English as a second language. It's a diverse community with complex problems and issues.

To face up to these issues, the council in 1998 radically overhauled its structure, fundamentally reducing the power of the traditional department heads.

Instead of a traditional corporate structure with a dozen or so single-function departments, there are now four cross-disciplinary departments:

- A City Outcomes Department (which decides on directions and strategies)
- A City Services Department (which carries out the strategies)
- An Environmental Standards Department (which sets and enforces regulations)
- A Corporate Support Department.

Within the City Outcomes Department there are four strategic programs, each with its own City Outcomes manager:

- Accessible City
- Clean, Safe, Healthy City
- Community Outomes
- Local Democracy and Governance.

Each program has sets of actions and pro-

jects and each City Outcomes manager has to report quarterly on progress.

The City Outcomes Department has six Place Managers who are responsible for different parts of the City.

These place managers are “fixers” who are easily accessed by the community and work closely with the local councillors to meet local needs.

As an extra layer of contact, council staff “adopt a suburb” as Suburb Support Officers who take responsibility for looking after the interests on an individual suburb.

Fairfield’s model is a radical change from existing local government structures and deserves attention by anyone interested in reforming councils

In conclusion, it’s worth keeping in mind that both place-based planning and place management can be either technocratic or democratic tools. It depends on the values of the people implementing them.

Potentially, in the hands of a council committed to high levels of citizen participation, they can be powerful tools to reinvent the contract between citizens and government.

Government is about people

We live in complicated world, and we need complicated processes and systems to make it work for us. Even democracy is a complicated process.

But government as a purely professional, managerial enterprise has delivered conflict instead of order, anger instead of respect, cynicism instead of optimism.

It is time to return to a view of government as a fundamentally democratic enterprise, inherently about people and leadership. One which harnesses the energies of communities for the good of communities.

This more balanced kind of government is possible through stronger democratic structures, devolving some power back to communities, renovating key administrative and planning processes, and focusing on the quality of neighbourhood life.

Fortunately there are plenty of creative and courageous innovators to inspire us in this task

Footnotes

1. From his paper at the Pathways to Sustainability Conference, Newcastle 1997
2. André Joyal, mathematician, quoted in New Scientist 23 May 1998 p53
3. Soorley, possibly Australia's most successful Labor politician, was recently elected to a fourth term by popular ballot.
4. Quoted with permission from Lyn Carson, from her Alison Burton Memorial Lecture Random Selection: Achieving Representation in Planning, Royal Australian Planning Institute, Canberra, August 1999.
5. The Shape the Shire website is at http://www.suthlib.nsw.gov.au/shapetheshire
6. The Purple Sage Project can be contacted on (03) 9670 4335 or email purplesage@vwt.org.au or see their website at http://yarranet.net.au/purplesage
7. All quotes from The Purple Sage Project public document 1999
8. ibid.
9. Carole Renouf, Rebirthing Democracy, The Experience of the First Australian Consensus Conference, in Consuming Interest, Autumn 1999, p16.
10. The Danish Board of Technology is a remarkable institution. It exists to promote debate and public participation in decisions about new technologies. It's methods include surveys, consensus conferences, role plays and scenario workshops. It's website is www.tekno.dk/eng/methods.htm
11. Renouf, op.cit., p17.
12. The full text of the report is available on the Australian Consumers Association website www.choice.com.au
13. In December 2000 the Federal Government carried out another of the conference's recommendations by establishing a powerful Gene technology Regulator.
14. Bao Xiang, Professor, Beijing Central Party School, reported in the Sydney Morning Herald, 9/4/98
15. Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portney and Ken Thompson, The Rebirth of Urban Democracy, The Brookings Institution 1993. Copies can be obtained from the Brookings Institution http://www.brookings.org
16. Summarised from Berry, Portney and Thompson, op.cit., pp12.
17. An important aspect of Seattle's approach is the skill-building workshops offered for citizens to allow them to meet on a level playing field with city officials. The workshops include conflict resolution. As one commentator noted "the Department of Neighbourhoods operates its workshops in order to hold citizens accountable, as well as to permit citizens to hold their government accountable".
18. They can all be seen on the city's web site at – http://www.ci.seattle.wa.us/npo/default.htm
19. Christchurch is not alone. In 1997 there were 139 Community Boards in New Zealand.
For a little more on Christchurch's Boards, see http://www.ccc.govt.nz/Council/CommunityBoards.asp
20. Also called social indicators, wellbeing indicators, quality-of-life indicators, sustainability indicators, healthy community indicators, scorecard projects and performance evaluation projects.
21. See The Oregon Progress Board home page: http://www.econ.state.or.us/opb/ It lists all the benchmarks, and 10 years of results.
22. The City of Adelaide was the first Australian city to apply place-based principles. It did so in the 1970s. The state planning system in South Australia has since adopted place-based planning, but it also retains zonings, a complication which urban planner John Mant regards as an superfluous.
23. You can see this on the internet at http://www.warringah.nsw.gov.au

Appendices

1) Some useful resources

Social Indicators & Citizenship Manual
Produced by the Victorian Council of Social Service (with a Stegley Foundation grant)
Phone (03) 9654 5050

Community Audit Kit
Produced by People Together
phone (03) 9347 0022.

The kit aims to help communities examine the impact of government social and economic policies and work together to build better strategies for creating the future.

The Citizens Handbook
A practical handbook for neighbourhood organising prepared by the Vancouver Citizens Committee. It's at:

http://www.vcn.bc.ca/citizens-handbook

It includes portraits of neighbourhood organisation systems in 10 other North American cities.

The Community Indicators Handbook
from Redefining Progress, 1 Kearny Street, San Francisco CA 94108

http://www.rprogress.org, info@rprogress.org
Phone 1 415 481 191

An accessible step-by-step guide to establishing a community indicators project, with samples of indicators used on other cities. Price $US30.

The Art of Placemaking
by David Engwicht

An inspiring video on recognising, destroying and building "placeness" by Australian urban activist David Engwicht, can be ordered for $20 through http://www.slonet.org/~canderso/de_prod.html

The Rebirth of Urban Democracy
by Jeffrey M. Berry, Kent E. Portney and Ken Thompson, The Brookings Institution, 1993.

The insightful study into the ingredients of success in five city-wide neighbourhood participation systems in the USA.

Order from the Brookings Institution at:
http://www.brookings.edu/pub/inprint.htm
(US$18.95 plus postage)

Resources for Non-profits
A hub-site with links to scores of how-to resources for those involved in organising non-profit organisations.

http://www.idealist.org/tools/tools.htm

The Society We Want
by Suzanne Peters

An innovative small group dialogue kit designed to guide discussion groups to find common ground on key social issues – families, work, health, and government. The process can also be used to stimulate a community-wide dialogue across a number of local organisations.

Can be downloaded from
http://www.cprn.com/f_family/tsww.htm

Reworking Success
by Robert Theobald,
New Society Publishers, 1997

An inspirational starting point for anyone getting involved in community-building (120 pages). Widely available in bookshops for $16.95 + GST.

The Guide to Effective Participation
by David Wilcox

A thoughtful and detailed problem-solving guide for those involved in community participation projects:

http://www.partnerships.org.uk/guide/Sum.html

The Sustainable Communities Network has a useful page of links to North American community indicator sites.

http://www.sustainable.org/creating/indicators.html

2) Ten lessons for community builders

In their Boundary Crossers: Community Leadership for a Global Age study, Neal Peirce and Curtis Johnson point out that it is unrealistic to expect elected representatives to take the lead in reinventing democracy. The burden for leading toward a new, citizen-based collaborative effort must rest largely with citizens. Taking that into consideration, they developed 10 lessons for 21st-century community builders:

Lesson 1: The table gets larger and rounder. The old-style top-down management style doesn't work any more. We are in a transition to a new leadership culture where citizens insist on having a place at the table. Thus, the table gets larger and rounder, with enough space for everyone who wants to participate.

Lesson 2: The only thing more challenging than a crisis may be its absence. Complacency may lead to unattended problems. Smart regions solve problems before they loom large.

Lesson 3: The agenda gets tougher. Revitalisation of downtown areas is easy compared to such issues as improving the lives of people caught in cycles of poverty and hopelessness.

Lesson 4: There is no magical leadership structure, just people and relationships. More than governance structure, it is relationships between people that get things done.

Lesson 5: No one's excused. Universities, professionals, religious communities and the media are top candidates to enrich the community-leadership mix.

Lesson 6: Sometimes the old ways still work. Individual leaders can still make things happen. Respect and welcome civic-minded leaders who can make a difference.

Lesson 7: Collaboration is messy, frustrating and indispensable. Today, cities and regions are fumbling toward collaboration, making mistakes, but beginning to form new, inclusive institutions that can solve problems and strengthen communities.

Lesson 8: Government always needs reforming, but all the reforms need government. Governments are playing new roles as civic bridge-builders. In all its myriad forms and despite all its inefficiencies and shortcomings, government is still an essential partner for real,

lasting, long-term change.

Lesson 9: Communities matter. Despite the rapid development and acceptance of the Internet, communities still matter. Those communities that matter the most are regions, centre cities and neighbourhoods.

Lesson 10: It's never over. No success is ever final. No community, no matter how successful, can ever rest on its accomplishments.

3) Nine criteria for effective participation

Developed by Lyn Carson, previously a council - lor on Lismore City Council, NSW, and now a lecturer in the School of Economics and Political Science at the University of Sydney.

1) Participation is timely. Participation should not be so late in the life of an issue that it is tokenistic. The timing should occur when citizens have the best chance of influencing outcomes.

2) Participants reflect a cross-section of population. Participants should be selected in a way that is not open to manipulation. Random selection offers the best chance of achieving this outcome.

3) Outcomes are focused on community, not self interest. Participants are not asked what they want personally but rather what they consider is appropriate in their role as citizens.

4) Process is interactive and deliberative. Questions or problems should not be reduced to a simplistic either/or response. Participation involves consideration of the big picture in discussion with fellow citizens and professional and non-professional experts.

5) Decision-making procedures are effective, preferably consensual. Complete agreement need not be the outcome but the process should enable participants to strive towards consensus.

6) Likelihood of recommendations being adopted is high. Faith in the process is important by both the power holders and participants. Contracts can be signed to ensure that recommendations will be acted on and, if not, the decision-making body should offer a public explanation for its inaction.

7) Process is in the hands of an independent, skilled, flexible facilitator. It is important that all participants control the agenda and content because this will give the process more credibility. A skilled facilitator with no vested interest is essential in order to achieve this.

8) Process is open, fair and subject to evaluation. In advance, evaluation questions should be formulated—for example, how will success be measured? What are the indicators of success, beyond the adoption of recommendations?

9) Process is cost effective. This might be difficult to establish. For example, how does one measure community wellbeing or savings in costly litigation that could arise in the absence of consultation and participation? What price does one attach to achieving clearer planning goals?

4) Seven patterns of a healthy community

These seven patterns of a healthy community were developed by Christopher Freeman Adams and Mary A. Pittman:

- Practices ongoing dialogue
- Generates leadership everywhere
- Shapes its future
- Embraces diversity
- Knows itself
- Connects people and resources
- Creates a sense of community.

The seven patterns are described in full at:

http://www.healthycommunities.org/cgi-bin/?MIval=HCA

and illustrated by a beautiful graphic, at:

http://www.communityinitiatives.com/7pattern.html

5) What is a Consensus Conference?

A consesus conference is a public meeting, which allows ordinary citizens to be involved in the assessment of technology. The conference is a dialogue between experts and citizens.

It is open to the public and the media. Usually it is attended by some members of the Parliament. The citizen panel plays the leading role: it consists of about 14 people who are introduced to the topic by a professional facilitator. The citizen panel formulates the questions to be taken up at the conference, and participates in the selection of experts to answer them.

The panel has two weekends for this preparation. The expert panel is selected in a way that ensures that essential opposing views and professional conflicts can emerge and be discussed at the conference. Good experts are not only knowledgeable but also open-minded and good communicators with an overview of their field.

An advisory/planning committee has the overall responsibility of making sure that all rules of a democratic, fair and transparent process have been followed.

On the first day of the conference, the experts present their answers to the questions from the citizen panel, from the point of view of their field of expertise. The following morning is reserved for clarifying questions and for discussions between the expert panel, the citizen panel and the audience. The rest of the second day and the third day are reserved for the citizen panel to produce a final document, presenting their conclusions and recommendations. Consensus on attitudes and recommendations is achieved through open discussion. Thus the final document is an expression of the extent to which the citizen panel can reach consensus.

On the morning of the fourth day, the citizen panel reads the final document to the experts and the audience, including the press. The experts have the opportunity to correct misunderstandings and factual errors, but at this point they are not allowed to influence the views of the citizen panel.

– Ida-Elisabeth Andersen and Birgit Jæger , Scenario workshops and consensus conferences: towards more democratic decision-making, paper available at the Danish Board of Technology website, www.tekno.dk1999