Observatory PASCAL

Place Management, Social Capital and Learning Regions

July 2007 PASCAL Hot Topic

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The Policy Implications of Creating Virtual Communities

Author: **David Adams**, Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) and Professor of Management and Innovation, University of Tasmania

The PASCAL Observatory is a consortium of RMIT University, Australia, the University of Stirling, Scotland, the State Government of Victoria, Australia, the Scottish Executive and Kent County Council, UK.

Contacts:

RMIT University	**University of Stirling**
Professor Bruce Wilson	Professor Mike Osborne
Head, Social Sciences and Planning	University of Stirling
RMIT University	Phone: +44 780 358 9722
Phone: +613 9925 2675	m.j.osborne@stir.ac.uk
Fax +613 9925 2985	
bruce.wilson@rmit.edu.au	

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There has been and remains considerable international interest in the idea of how to strengthen communities and over the past decade many new ideas and practices have emerged (DVC 2004a, FACS 2004, Gilchrist 2004). Indeed around the world there are 'new' government departments popping up all over the place with the word 'community' somewhere in the title. In Australia in the last 5 years five such entities have emerged and only last July (2006) the UK established a Department for Community and Local Government. Community has been one of the three biggest growth areas for the emergence of new policies and public administration machinery in western liberal democracies over the last decade (the other two being sustainability and security). So what does it all mean? Can and should governments even be in the community business?

This paper analyses - through the lens of a case study from Victoria Australia – how the idea of community strengthening has been embedded into the institutional apparatus of a regional government. This is largely an insider's account of the emergence of the community paradigm. The focus is on describing the key themes and the policy apparatus that has emerged to give public administrative form to the idea of stronger communities. Throughout the paper I provide links to the key documents which provide the technical discussions of how the public policy and public administration of community is playing out in Victoria.

Secondly, the paper canvasses some of the policy challenges associated with governments becoming involved in the business of 'creating' community. In particular I present an example of an 'e' community in Victoria. This case is presented to illustrate the depth of penetration of the public policy idea of community.

Overall the primary purpose of the paper is to illustrate what governments are actually doing in this policy field – the public policy and public administration of an idea - rather than to critique it. I leave the critique of the communities agenda to a brief concluding comment, noting here that for many people the whole idea of governments engaging in the communities agenda is fraught.

The paper takes the form of a general consideration of communities and of the approach adopted in Victoria (Part 1), followed by an account of the new Victorian Youthcentral networked community initiative (Part 2). [I have also appended extracts from some of the relevant DVC documents to which this paper refers.]

Part 1

In 2002 the Victorian Government created the first Department anywhere in federal Australia with a specific brief to explore the nature of community in public policy, and how the levers of a regional government could be applied to extract public value from the idea. There were four main drivers for the creation of the Department

- a sense that government was out of touch with the public and needed new ways of 'reading the pulse' of Victorians and engaging with them
- a growing interest in the reconstituted ideas about social capital emerging from the Putnam and Coleman literatures but also from the social epidemiological literature
- a concern that governance through functional programs was creating fragmentation and so called silo approaches to community and that organising around people and places could generate new ideas about how to organise the planning and delivery of public value.
- a desire by the incoming Labor Government to put greater emphasis on social wellbeing compared to the focus on economic growth of the previous conservative government

The Department brought together a range of people and place based functions from across government (Blacher 2005, 2006) based not around functions (such as health and education) but around the core ideas of strengthening communities primarily through place based strategies that explored new ways of planning and delivering services.

After four years we are now seeing four important interrelated themes consistently emerging – themes which reflect our learnings to date and which may constitute the building blocks of the body of knowledge around the public administration of building stronger communities.

Importantly these themes are not based on some pre-determined deductive model. Rather, they are being built up from reflecting on our practices and experiences to date. Indeed, what makes this field so interesting is that there is no model or template from which we are working. We are all still exploring and learning as we go, and in doing so, developing a *public policy* of community strengthening.

The four themes are:

1. Community strengthening - which is about building active, confident and resilient communities; that is communities that have a sustainable mix of assets (economic, human, natural, cultural), *and* strong networks that maximise the use of those assets.

2. Governance - If there is one key insight from what we have learned over the past three years it is that governance issues and community strengthening are intertwined – the way resources are organised and delivered shapes community strength.

Communities that can make decisions about their futures through participatory governance arrangements and partnerships are more likely to be active, confident and resilient.

Strong networks require sound governance. This includes all the decision-making processes, policies and practices that impact on a community. Strong governance is characterised by broad and inclusive networks of decision-makers utilising processes which ensure that all the interests within communities have a voice in decision-making and problem-solving.

3. Place and Local Communities - One of the most prevalent criticisms of our existing programmatic approach to policy and service delivery is the centralisation of government decision-making and the fragmentation of services delivered on the ground. What we have difficulty doing under our current administrative arrangements is:

- coordinating investment and service delivery at the local level
- understanding the cumulative impact of government on communities
- involving people in decisions that affect their lives, particularly government investment in local communities
- adopting a place-based approach in government is for some issues a strategy for addressing these issues.

4. Skills and Culture – A focus on community strengthening and place challenges the orthodoxy of the program format of the public sector and the role of the public servant as the implementer of government policy through agreed policy and service delivery guidelines.

In principle the shift is from a traditional hierarchical model to one characterised by multi-sectoral partnerships through which local communities have an enhanced capacity to shape directions, set priorities and control resources. This necessarily involves greater use of team-based approaches to planning, funding and delivery of services, and bringing together locally (often literally in terms of co-location) officers from various government (state, local and perhaps commonwealth) agencies working on similar objectives.

Changes of this nature need to be supported by the development of skills and leadership cultures within the public sector that are comfortable in working in this environment. Communities that are more active confident and resilient are more likely to be able to take control of their futures.

I now canvass each of these themes in a little more detail.

Community Strengthening

There is a growing body of national and international evidence (DVC 2006a, Lin 2001, OECD 2001, Vinson 2004) that successful community strengthening strategies correlate strongly to the creation of stronger social and civic institutions, improved well-being (lower imprisonment rates, higher levels of school completion) and increased social and economic opportunities.

There are important policy implications from this research.

If community strengthening activities can contribute to buffering the impact of poverty and disadvantage for many - then it is particularly interesting that some of the strategies needed to achieve improved outcomes may not be very complex. They involve things like encouraging volunteering, investing in social infrastructure, sport, recreation and community arts facilities, and even improved streetscaping and attention to local amenities.

What this research is beginning to suggest is that investing in communities is really no more or less than an approach to prevention or early intervention with the potential over time to be a factor in reducing the rate of increase in the demand on some of the most resource-intensive services provided by State governments.

Recently DVC released a report tracking a range of community strengthening indicators across each of the 79 local government areas in Victoria (DVC 2005 a). What was particularly striking was the variation of these indicators from one local government area to another.

For example:

- the percentage of the population that feel safe on the street alone after dark ranges from 50% - 89%
- those who feel there are opportunities to have a real say on issues ranges from 41% - 71% of the adult population
- parental participation in schools ranges from 44% - 81%
- Volunteering on a regular basis ranges from 23% to 64%.

These data, a first for any jurisdiction in Australia, will provide a basis over time for tracking change and making community strength more visible as part of a more comprehensive approach to a common set of state-wide indicators of well-being of communities.

They can also provide a guide for government as to where to direct its investments. For example, using the indicators we can see which communities lack strong local governance structures, which communities need assistance in increasing participation, and which communities need to build their stocks of volunteers.

This brings me to the second theme; that of governance. It is one thing to recognise differences in community strength between localities. It is another to create partnerships and relationships which link government investment to encouraging more active participation by individuals in their communities

Governance

When I refer to governance, I am using the term in its broadest meaning to include all the decision-making policies, processes and practices that impact on a community.

This includes the internal policies and practices of the three levels of government, as well as the myriad of management committees that are associated with public institutions such as community organisations, school boards, residents groups and business boards.

Strong governance is built through connectedness. Network theorists such as Berkman and Glass (2000) and Lin (2001) argue that healthy communities require a balance of three types of social connection:

- close personal networks
- broader associational ties and community networks
- governance networks.

These different network types generate different benefits for individuals and communities (not always positive) and each provides a foundation for building the other; strong networks can give people the skills and confidence needed to participate in broader associational and community activities.

This observation provided the basis for the Government's recognition of the need to reform the way government agencies work with local communities; finding better ways of helping people to help themselves.

There are six what we call key design principles which underpin reforms in changing the way government agencies interact with communities. They are:

- Viewing the world through the lens of the clients, be they individuals, families or communities (*client focussed principle*);
- Developing a simpler or single face of government locally (*principle of place*);
- Shifting from government controlling and directing the delivery of services to government playing the role of facilitator and enabler (*principle of enabling*);
- Devolving service planning and delivery to the local level (*principle of subsidiarity*);
- Developing cross-sectoral approaches to addressing social opportunities and problems through partnerships between governments, community agencies and the corporate sector. (*principle of partnership*); and
- Harnessing the capacity of local leaders and entrepreneurs (*principle of local capacity and ownership*). This means not just the 'usual suspects', but hearing the voices of people in addition to the peak bodies and organisations which governments usually deal with.

These principles are fine and indeed important in thinking at a conceptual level in relation to the changing role of government agencies in the emerging environment. The principles are not new; many received an airing through the Council of Australian Governments in the 1980's and 1990's.

But for those who are public administrators the job is to give practical effect to the theory. This is a more difficult task. Put simply, the question is: how can we re-organise our structural and operational arrangements to give effect to these principles?

The initial Victorian attempt at answering this question has included:

The alignment of regional boundaries of State Departments into eight administrative regions. Prior to this reform each department had a set of unique regional boundaries. While they were similar – small differences meant that departments didn't line up with each other – they also didn't align with Local Government boundaries. This lack of consistency caused difficulties in establishing regional discussions within and between governments, and acted as a brake on establishing stronger working relationships at the regional level. The benefit gained from aligning the boundaries was to establish a more geographically consistent set of regional interests held by government departments and their corresponding local governments, and the creation of a structural platform for joining up at local level.

The establishment of Regional Management Forums (RMFs). Building on the boundary alignment initiative the government introduced a new form of regional governance to Victoria – Regional Management Forums. The Forums, which meet quarterly, include state departmental managers and local government Chief Executive Officers, along with a Departmental Secretary as regional champion. The role of the Forums is to examine critical issues facing the region, and to encourage cooperation between departments and with councils, and statutory authorities. Although they have only been in operation for a short period of time RMFs have already commenced a range of place based initiatives, as well as commencing strategic projects designed to improve information-sharing and joint planning processes at the local level.

A commitment to the greater use of team-based approaches. *A Fairer Victoria* included a commitment to develop Community Project Teams - a new type of administrative arrangement designed to deliver policies in a local setting that require the involvement of more than one department or sector. Community Project Teams are about creating the administrative flexibility needed to engage communities on complex issues and work with them collaboratively, and achieving this aim within existing public sector management, administration and accountability frameworks.

Local presence staff where we are increasing numbers of staff located in local communities across Victoria to work face to face with communities.

A focus on broadly based community consultation, including groups often excluded, such as Culturally and Linguistically Diverse communities. An example of how we do this is through 'In The Community' forums where senior staff from DVC regularly visit communities to canvass priority issues. Over 20 have been held so far, resulting in significant investment through DVC grants.

Community level planning and priority setting. This is a key role for local government, for example in developing Community Plans. DVC is rationalising the range of planning requirements imposed on local councils, boosting the importance of community planning, and aligning councils' planning and reporting with that of state government departments.

Strategic grant-making. All grants are being reconfigured to provide three types of supports into local communities: Planning, to form partnerships and develop good strategies; Capacity-building, such as leadership investments; and Infrastructure investments, such as community facilities.

Direct community involvement in governance, for example in priority setting; in the design of investment strategies; in delivery; in managing; in reporting. This is happening in the community renewal strategies, and in the approach to indigenous communities.

The key point here is that building stronger communities requires us to reorient our focus from state level programs to local communities, and in doing so to give greater priority than in the past to developing the capacity of communities, creating more opportunities for them to participate in priority-setting and shaping local investment in infrastructure and services.

Together, these initiatives are establishing a platform for simplifying and strengthening governance arrangements for a range of significant public institutions, not least of all State and Local Government. They create the conditions for stronger communities and to focus the scale and scope of government activity towards local communities, a focus on people and places.

Place and Local Communities

The current approach to public administration is organised primarily around portfolios and programs, rather than people and communities. (Adams and Hess 2001) This makes government easy for those on the inside to operate, but hard for communities to understand and work with. Organising around communities requires a rethink of many traditional public policy and administration settings.

In this context I make three observations.

First, it is important to focus on communities, because they are places and spaces where people create identity, trust and belongingness; they are where people can turn to others for support; they are where people learn to make judgements about the world; they are where people work and play and live their lives. Putnam would say that they are places where people bond, bridge and link.

Secondly, the scale at which community strengthening interventions appear to work best is relatively small, at the level of a neighbourhood, a suburb or a town.

Thirdly, by communities we should include communities of interest and identity as well as traditional communities of place. For example the SMS texting world of young people can be considered a community. Why? Because it is a space where young people form relations, make judgments about the world, and turn to others for support.

Those in public administration with a long history of program thinking need to better understand these new communities in order to be able better to engage with them.

Skills and Culture

Delivering these types of interventions requires a rethink of how we organise and operate as public sector agencies. It also highlights the need to focus on the cultures of our organisations, and reflect on the skills and norms which are valued by the leaders and managers of our departments and agencies.

Increasingly we need to reward the capacity to work collaboratively, both internally and with external partners, no less and perhaps even more than we reward the more showy displays of expertise which often pass for high quality policy advice. We need to promote staff who achieve value through working with others as well as standing out from the crowd because of their conceptual dexterity.

We need to reward those who go the extra mile in assisting people to find their way through the incredibly opaque maze that is often the public face of government agencies. And we need to go out and listen to the views of people wanting to participate in public debate, using consultative processes which suit those people rather than those that are convenient to us. These characteristics are not evident in large complex organisations which comprise the public sector agencies.

A conscious, sustained effort on the part of leaders and managers will be required to change the cultures of their agencies to make these attributes core behaviours which are valued and rewarded. In our own way in DVC we are attempting this change particularly in the way in which both managers and other staff have developed the roles of our local presence teams; those in the department who work actively with local communities.

Essentially these teams have four roles:

- *Navigating* government. This role includes assisting people and organisations to better understand how to access DVC and other government funding programs; *an orientation by our staff to be door openers rather than gatekeepers.*
- *Brokering* – working with individuals and community organisations to facilitate solutions to problems by bringing together appropriate resources from across government to resolve the issues at hand.
- *Facilitating* investment. This involves working with both communities and departments to try to co-ordinate the flow of investments in ways that make sense from the perspective of the projects or activities being considered, rather than being stymied by the artificial silos created by different funding programs, with differing closing dates for application and different criteria often for similar programs.
- *Partnerships*- to undertake these activities through creating networks which encourage the development of sustained collaborations and partnerships in local communities.

So what does all this theorising about communities mean in practice? In part 2 I present one example of how the theory is being applied.

Part 2

Whilst critics and scholars are still debating the merits of social capital and the efficacy of the communities agenda, governments are now moving rapidly in the space of virtual communities. To illustrate what governments are doing to help facilitate community formation, especially in new suburbs. I use as a lateral example a very modern networked community. I take the example of *Youthcentral* in Victoria to illustrate how ICT can be used to 'create' a community, not just a website. Again, the policy implications of governments being in these spaces are, in my view, quite profound.

Youthcentral in its most basic form is a website for young people, but importantly - and this is the key issue today - DVC has supported young people in creating a community out of *Youthcentral. Youthcentral* as a community is more attractive to young people than just a website. This is reflected in its exponential growth. For government, it enables us to explore how technology can be shaped to strengthen communities and tackle the many issues associated with how IT can be a source of both inclusion and exclusion. *Youthcentral* is therefore also part of transforming the way government thinks and works. For many young people the role of traditional place-based communities is being replaced by virtual communities such as *Youthcentral* and the SMS texting community.

The important issue about communities is not to debate endlessly the many types of communities – place, interest, professional, transient, mobile, professional, virtual, etc - but to look at what features we value in community and how the levers of government can positively support those features. Communities are valued because they are:

- shapers of identity, belonging, pride, self-esteem
- a reference point for judgements
- a site for service provision and/access to other services
- where we can turn to others for support

- a source of innovation and creativity
- meeting places and spaces, especially for disengaged or excluded people.

Youthcentral was designed with these valued community features in mind. Of course, business astutely worked out some time ago that communities (including virtual communities) are also markets, so we can add this as another feature, and indeed one that young people value highly.

DVC is particularly focussed on promoting better associational networks – sport, recreation, arts, culture, etc - as well as focussing on new ways of connecting people into associations and connecting associations into the key institutions of society, such as civic participation. To use a UK phrase, *Youthcentral* is also a strategy aimed at '*renewing the civic realm*'', that is, encouraging young people to be more active in their local communities and creating the incentives and means of doing so. So *Youthcentral* is one strategy to help create an inclusive community for young people, and to create links to broader social and civic engagement.

Governments worldwide are seeking effective ways to engage the youth demographic in policy-making and social participation. The United Nations World Youth Report (May 2005) states that '…*one example that seems to reverse the decline in traditional participation and civic engagement by youth is Internet based activities…*'

The rise of the internet as a dominant medium and two-way communication channel for young people, has presented particular challenges and opportunities for government in relating to young people as a unique cohort in the community.

The *Youthcentral* story demonstrates that a shift in the traditional service delivery business model has been necessary to attract and retain young people's interest and attention. Why? There are two possible reasons for this: the Internet is fast becoming the dominant medium of choice for young people; and there is a different form of community at work for young people - their sense of community is expressed differently and we have to understand it through their lens.

As a snapshot of characteristics and behaviours of the eGeneration in techno-literacy terms, note the following with respect to young people:

- They are in their comfort zone online: arguably the most confident, tech savvy, marketing–wary audience on the net, but hard to capture
- They are embracing new technologies with passion, but for what purpose? They are downloading, gaming, chatting, texting, streaming, blogging, vlogging, trading, and podcasting to communicate, create community and create and maintain social networks
- 96% of all 16-29-year-olds last year in Australia have used the Internet
- Most access it from home
- There is almost equal subscription to broadband in Victoria for rural and regional as metro (42% rural 45%) subscribers
- Latest studies show that it is their favourite information source: young Australians aged 10-25 rank the internet highly as a primary source of information for general issues and concerns

- Next to family and friends, research shows that young people turn to the Net as a major source of advice and support: its immediate, accessible and anonymous
- It is their preferred source for jobs in particular
- They are more likely to use the internet to source information than are any other age group in the community
- In 2006 a Nielsen Net ratings survey found that 75% of 15-17 year olds use the internet for 5-15 hours a week
- The rise of the Internet as a user-driven content distributor is replacing traditional distribution methods as broadcasting moves from mass to niche channel.

Two massively successful phenomena demonstrate this:

- U tube : one year ago the creators of this phenomenon were working in a shabby office above a pizza shop. Now they are billionaires, because they have offered people15 seconds of fame. U tube is one of the most popular sites on the Web
- My Space tells a similar story, with user-driven control of content.

 As noted earlier, young people are also increasingly seeing the web as a medium for civic engagement as eCitizens:

- Young people are using the internet to gather information, express themselves and exercise power as pre-voting and voting citizens
- The internet is intrinsically democratic. It engenders new skills, habits, protocols and forms of participation. It is subversive and non-linear, not top down. It can create community easily, and young people recognise this
- The Internet has created an experimental space in which elements of contemporary citizenship are being refreshed, reshaped and redefined, and where two-way communication is the norm.
- Young people are attracted to innovative networks of civic connection
- They are the first to recognise that the Internet provides new forms of civic communication that will be ubiquitous within a generation from now
- Peer to peer networks where views can be exchanged
- This includes discussion opportunities where young people have evidence that other people are listening to what they say.

The challenge for government is to appeal to them in this space. How have we sought to do that in Victoria? The framework involves

- Emphasis on peer based content
- Embedding of young people within the governance model
- Commitment to train and develop the skill base of diverse young people to ensure that they can contribute
- Being both intensely local and global at the same time
- Making it an enjoyable experience

Youthcentral is built on a solid platform of voluntary youth participation, with the direct involvement of over 3000 young people to date from all over Victoria. The demand is rapidly growing. Young people carry both paid and voluntary roles as writers, editors, mentors, trainers, reporters, designers, consultants, testers and more..

Youthcentral's content and training based model of youth participation was designed to support DVC's place-based community strengthening agenda. We have discovered that *Youthcentral's* participation model maps very effectively onto this agenda, because the internet for this audience is an ideal place-based information and community-building tool.

In e-service delivery terms *Youthcentral* seeks to provide convenient information pathways to assist young people when faced with life issues such as gaining jobs and training, moving out of home, health and lifestyle decisions, connecting to events and services, and networking in their communities. User surveys have shown that the website is assisting young people to build their personal capacity, and to address some of the key drivers that affect their life chances, such as

- exclusion them from the job market,
- education and training issues,
- health and wellbeing-related enquiries
- social networking capacity and civic participation.

This is not the only reason why *Youthcentral* is attracting a user base of 28-30,000 unique users per month. We think that the model is working so far because *Youthcentral* has grown essentially two kinds of interconnecting communities that young people value:

- The virtual user community who read and comment on one another's contributions, and who regularly return to the site to source the pages; *and*
- The real community of young people participating all over the State, who have signed up for the training and development programs which lead them into paid positions as content producers and coordinators. These young people (editorial team members and roving reporters) meet regularly to discuss and make decisions about the sit. *They are the key governing body* – they own the product to a large extent.

It is the integration of online technology and internet communications coupled with offline training and skill development activities that is connecting young people to government, their communities and each other.

Conclusion

The communities agenda internationally continues to pick up pace driven not by the communitarian ideal of democratisation but by the more pragmatic objectives of governments wanting better services on the one hand and a better ability to understand and shape communities on the other. From this, governments reasonably expect to address the widely experienced problem of a 'trust deficit'.

Importantly, the increasing shift back to localised strategies, and the development of online dialogues, is creating new forms of policy advice back into governments. These sources of local

information are increasingly valued by ministers and senior bureaucrats, as they provide low cost real time access to the pulse of communities.

Governments internationally are increasingly exploring this new policy space around communities. I have presented the basic logic of how and why this is happening. Increasingly, local governments are moving in the field, and the Australian Commonwealth Government is still sensibly prevaricating as to whether a central government can effectively operate at neighbourhood level. My purpose has been to illustrate the breadth and pace of action that is underway, much of it hidden from view. For many governments this is still a social venture capital experiment.

Just as governments and markets merged in the 1990s, there are now signs of governments and communities merging. It is however important to acknowledge that the communities agenda internationally is hotly contested. I have not canvassed the many critiques in this paper. There are seven main lines of critique:

- It is all a scam glossing over the evils of capitalism and oppression of the poor
- Community might have agency but we can't really understand it sufficiently to warrant investment of public resources
- The debate is now so muddled and politically appropriated by the left and right that it no longer has any currency
- Government has made and will continue to make a mess of it; community strengthening should be left to families/the market/NGO's/local government/all of the above
- Community is often a site of oppression.
- It's a form of social engineering by stealth (which may be good or bad depending on your view of social engineering)
- Cause and effect is tenuous and diffuse the evidence at best ambiguous.

These critiques all have some efficacy; many governments and scholars have over-enthused and over-promised about communities. As a rhetorical political construction of government the idea of community has been well used by all sides of politics, and is not a panacea for structural inequality in society. The communities agenda is and will continue to be on the margins of government resource allocations - generally less than 10% of recurrent appropriations. However, it continues to grow heuristically and exponentially as a new policy field, and needs to be the subject of more rigorous analysis as there are many implications for governments in moving into the communities agenda. Five are of particular significance.

Functional vs Population Organising

Firstly the agenda throws out a challenge to the dominance of the functional mode of organising. To date western public administration based on the Weberian model of rationality has been spectacularly successful in supporting the rapid growth of liberal democractic capitalist states. The organisation of public policy and its administration into functions (such as health and education) has been an efficient form of administrations enabling the growth of specialist forms of organising and specialist bodies of expertise. But it has come at a cost. Population and place based policies and outcomes are rarely the sum of their constituent parts. The communities agenda provides an alternative way of organising many public services – for

example a shift from functional output based funding to place or issues based outcomes funding.

Its always been an historical nuance to me that whilst democracy is organised around place (electorates and parliaments) public policy and its administration is primarily organised around functions. The complexities of co-ordinating multi functional approaches may well be at a point where the disadvantages outweigh the advantages.

Community vs Professional Knowledge

Second the agenda challenges the dominance of professional expertise and the simplistic notion that community knowledge can simply be 'tapped' through consultation and fed into centralist policy processes. The communities agenda has much more of a constructivist epistemological underpinning – one for example that values tacit and historical knowledge to a greater extent than the rationally of professional expertise. The communities agenda posits for example the importance of co-production of knowledge and the importance of iterative and inductive forms of reasoning to informing policy and its administration (see for example Stilgoe 2006).

Public Value

Third the agenda helps redefine the important idea of public value. To date the idea of public value has tended to focus on functional outcomes (better health and education for example) rather than on broader outcomes such as trust, reciprocity, happiness and supportive networks. As Moore (1995) and others have argued public value is about what the public value not about outputs and bureaucratically defined outcomes. The agenda highlights the active role of governance. In much of the writing on public administration the focus has been on administration as a consequential organisational issue rather being central to the co-production of policy. The challenge is to embrace new forms of local governance that embed the value of community knowledge and which focus on the place/space level outcomes rather than simply a multitude of functional outcomes. One of reasons that the recent 'outcomes' focus in the public sector has failed to deliver significant public value is because of the mistaken assumption that the accumulated functional outcomes of government interventions will constitute societal level outcomes.

Needs vs Assets

Fourthly the agenda challenges the traditional public policy paradigm of needs and services. This paradigm – especially strong in social policy- contrast with the communities agenda which has an assets and opportunities framework. Youth Central emerged because ICT connectivity is a potential community asset that can be exploited by governments, communities and markets to create opportunities (eg access to skills) and mitigate risks (eg social exclusion). The communities agenda commences not with the individual or the family or with specific functions but with the individual and family in a context of institutions and networks – and the relations that are formed.

The policy response to a public policy risk (such as security of energy supply) or an opportunity (such as social innovation through community enterprises) should begin with an understanding

of the relative strength of the community and the potential for existing assets to be mobilised as a response. Those assets include both endogenous and exogenous resources with the public policy focus being on how governments can build and utilise community network capacity (as with Youth Central) as a key strategy.

The Future of Local institutions

The logical extension of the communities agenda is to privilege those local institutions that can be close to the people, democratically responsible, general purpose and responsive to local risks and opportunities. In principle this pushes towards a greater role for local governments. Indeed they can and should be the stewards of communities. Increasingly we are also seeing the emergence of new hybrid social institutions which have both network and institutional characteristics. These include for example catchment management authorities; growth area authorities; and public private hybrids (such as in the tourism industry) and ; regional development bodies . Such entities tend to have a place/community focus and operate at the regional and sub regional level. Precisely because they can be simultaneously institution like (eg reproduce the conditions of their own existence) and network like (nimble and able to change form quickly) they are likely to become a preferred form of future organising. In doing so they can sit uncomfortably with the old command and control model of public administration.

The communities agenda is likely to remain a hot topic for some time to come.

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About the author

Professor David Adams has been a senior executive in the Victorian Government for 8 years where he has held various positions including head of strategy in the Premiers Department and Executive Director Strategic Policy & Research in the Department for Victorian Communities where he was instrumental in the development of the 'A Fairer Victoria' policy statements – setting the long term social policy directions for the Government.

David regularly publishes on the changing nature of communities; the importance of local knowledge to innovation; measurement of community resilience and; post modernism in public administration.

In 2002 David was awarded the national Sir George Murray Prize for his analysis of poverty debates in Australia 'Poverty: A Precarious Public Policy Idea'. In 2004 David won the Sam Richardson Award for the most influential publication in the Australian Journal of Public Administration and his most recent article on 'Useable knowledge in public policy' was the most accessed Australian public policy article in 2005.

David is also the Professor of Management and Innovation at the University of Tasmania and Visiting Fellow in the Asia Pacific School of Economics and Governance at the Australian National University.