

Trust and Power in Community Engagement for Urban Water Planning and Policy

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Introduction

Planning for water management has become a critical issue in Australia with increasing frequency and duration of drought conditions. At the same time, public authorities are increasingly using public participation and community engagement to inform policy and strategy development. Gold Coast Water was one of the first public utilities in Australia to engage, on paper, in true community engagement.

Public Participation and Community Engagement

True community engagement, as put forth by Arnstein, (1969) includes partnership, delegated power and citizen control. The concept of partnership is the visible face of the Gold Coast Waterfuture strategy. Like numerous other public participation and community engagement strategies aimed at informing the policy and planning process, the Gold Coast Waterfuture strategy promised on paper to enact the sorts of ideal principles put forth by Habermas's theory of communicative action. For example participants' access to the planning/policy process, the power of the committee to influence the process and outcomes, access to information, equality among participants, and finally the seeking of a rational consensus (Cohen, 1989). Examples of how these ideals and principles would be met in theory are provided by Gold Coast Water in the terms of reference and the advisory committee information paper for the members of the community advisory committee. The terms of reference include examples of these ideals including "To oversee the development of a Water Supply Strategy for the Gold Coast City that is ecologically sustainable, affordable and embraced by the community;" (access to the planning/policy process) "Any issues raised in meetings that are outside the context of the meeting will be noted on a parking lot of issues. These issues will be reported on at the following meeting;" (influence in the process) "The committee will endeavour to achieve consensus decision making;" (rational consensus) and "All information and pre-reading materials will be sent in PDF format via email. Should a member not have access to email, then hard copies of the information will be sent" (access to information) (Gold Coast Water, 2004).

While community engagement based on communicative action theory may seem like an ideal process to develop policy or planning strategy, there have been several critiques of this deliberative-style approach to community engagement processes. Two theoretical critiques of these ideal principles will be addressed:

- Communicative action theory doesn't go far enough towards inclusiveness and equality for the actors, (Young, 1995; Kliger and Cosgrove, 1999) and
- These ideals focus on what should be done, rather than what is actually happening in practice (Flyvbjerg, 1998; Yiftachel and Huxley, 2000).

Both of these critiques highlight the absence of power relationships in the ideal situation. Real life political and administrative behaviour can be best understood through the key concept of power (Flyvbjerg, 1998).

These ideals and principles, however, do not truly reflect what happens in practice. From the information obtained from the members of the community advisory committee, practice showed that while the participants did have access to the policy and planning process, not all potential stakeholders did as illustrated by the following quote:

"I just thought there was a huge slice of the community that was missing. I think that you know, we had a lot of older people, for the want of a better term, and these couple of young, I mean the token school students that in actual fact didn't manage to get to too many of the meetings, but there was nothing in that middle area at all. I mean that kind of

inadvertently they kind of got captured, because you know your GECKO bloke was probably in that area, he wasn't there for those reasons or that purpose, so it did sort of go through my mind a little bit, what was their process for getting a cross section of the community. And there was certainly no indigenous, from what I could see, representation, yah, it seemed extremely polarised, from what I could see." (Community Advisory Member 4).

The thought that the committee had the power to influence the outcomes, and that all participants were equal was also met with some scepticism:

"Some advisory committees tended to be set up, if you set the advisory committee up and you know the outcome that you want and you work towards that outcome, and they're really not needed. You're more or less dictating to the advisory committee the outcome that you want, whereas this was a bit more open-ended and explored a lot of different views." (Community Advisory Member 3).

"I think that the community felt that they were engaged, and that is an important outcome I think, even if they didn't necessarily influence the outcome, at least they knew that they were part of the process." (Community Advisory Member 4).

"...[T]hen it went to a vote, and ah, he lost, so what he then did, he then passed a motion at council that removed the voting power of everyone except the external people, so anyone that belonged to a government or quasi-government organisation lost their ability to vote. So they disenfranchised us" (Community Advisory Member 10).

"I think, it annoyed me quite a number of times, that we were, as a committee, we were the token gestures, ah look, just feed them anything, as long as they say yes at the end of it, it doesn't matter." (Community Advisory Member 11).

Trust and Power

Despite these criticisms of public participation and community engagement, and the differences between ideal and reality, a benefit that emerges from this type of process is trust. Trust can be broken down into several levels; calculus-based trust, where the actors involved weigh and calculate the costs and benefits of trusting before engaging in a trusting relationship (Maguire, Phillips and Hardy, 2001); knowledge-based trust where actors enter into a trust relationship based on previous knowledge of the other actors and/or situation (Maguire, Phillips and Hardy, 2001); and active trust, a strong form of trust that is built through participatory events.

Active trust, born out of public participation and community engagement activities comes about through active participation in a problem solving situation, reciprocity, open verbal and non-verbal communication, on-goingness and reflexivity (Argyris, 1999; Edwards, 1999; Hornig-Priest, 2005). Other characteristics of active trust that contribute to its strength include information exchange, commitment, and the ability to create trust without prior trust or knowledge of the situation (Child and Möllering, 2003), although this has been debated.

The interactions between power and trust are of interest here as it can contribute to our understanding of what is really happening in practice. In theory, these public participation and community engagement processes promise to build active trust between actors, but the exercise of power by some of these same actors influences the creation of trust or in some cases, distrust.

"If you are technically competent, you can guide the committee in a direction that you want it to go, and they trust you." (Community Advisory Member 10).

"It was something authoritative. You always sort of trust in authority." (Community Advisory Member 9).

Yet, in some cases, there were conflicting ideas about whether or not trust was being developed through the engagement process, revolving around the information provided by not only Gold Coast Water, but also some of the actors involved.

"Small things, big things, it didn't matter, they presented their presentation to look favourable on their issues that they wanted to push forward." (Community Advisory Member 11).

A fundamental aspect of trust building in general that seems to have been omitted from the building of active trust is that people's expectations have been met.

"I certainly trusted the process that they were giving, I didn't see that they were hiding anything, everything that was asked for pretty much was delivered; they were open and transparent." (Community Advisory Member 4).

"Focusing on, I suppose, how the committee or in the process developed trust in my team and I, I think it's a little bit sort of multi-fold and that is that we undertook to deliver things at a certain time frame, and we went out of our way to achieve that. So, if we set a deadline, then we pretty well met it or we explained why. So we try to always close the communication expectation, one way or the other." (Community Advisory Member 13).

Beyond the theoretical aspects that postulate how active trust is built, committee members have said time and time again that a large contributor to the building of trust is the time and ability to create social relationships with other actors in the process.

"I was going to say, an important, interestingly important part of the process is that they provided a meal, and that did provide an opportunity for people to have, have that general relationship building conversation." (Community Advisory Member 4).

"I will try and focus on how the committee itself developed trust. Again the familiarity of the sort of social opportunities that were given." (Community Advisory Member 13).

Conclusion

The development of trust in these public participation/ community engagement processes is much more complex than the ideal theory would have you believe. Certainly the attributes of how active trust is built are important and do play a role in the development of active trust, but there are many more subtle aspects, particularly around how actors mobilise these resources and how they exercise the power has a large influence on the development of trust. It also seems to depend on each individual's personal context at the time, whether they developed trust, and how.

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