Between Council and Community: Public Participation and Sustainability in Local Government

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Sustainability is an important process and objective of society, although not supported by all. In any case, legislation and practice increasingly emphasises public participation in the context of environmental and sustainability issues. Legislation in NSW links the progress of environmental sustainability, partly, to the actions of local governments through their budgeting plans. Whatever its importance and legislative imperative, the sustainability project has been less than successful in two crucial ways. Firstly, the effects of sustainability practice in local government have not been completely successful and, secondly, while practitioners have refined the techniques of public participation, public participation has had little impact on decision making. The gap between theory and practice in both cases seems wide and is explored here. The study broadly fits within an ethnographic approach and primarily used participant observation as the method of data gathering. This paper presents some preliminary findings of a PhD-in-progress that examines the case of Liverpool City Council and its attempt to institute a new model of public participation to directly link the Council's overall strategic budgeting document, the Corporate Plan, to renewed efforts at direct public participation. The new model is presented and some of the problems of directly linking sustainability to the Corporate Plan are discussed.

Introduction

This paper is a brief account of *Creating Our Future Together Partnership Project* initiated by Liverpool City Council, a Western Sydney local government authority, in June 2004. And of my participation, as a PhD research student, in the Partnership Project (the Project) throughout its first 19 months, to January 2006. My involvement encompassed 'Stage 1' of an iterative process. This paper comes from that research: the preliminary findings of a work in progress. This project was initiated in the wake of the dismissal of all elected Councillors by the State Government due to the Oasis scandal and the subsequent appointment of an Administrator in April 2004 (Daly, 2004). The Project set out to initiate a profound change program within the community and Council of Liverpool. The Project was originally located within a change-framework of facilitating Liverpool into becoming a community with a sustainable future.

My study is grounded in several underlying concepts. One of these concepts describes the integrity of life on this planet as not only being in a poor condition, but in decline, and that changing this situation requires action (NRC, 1999; WRI, 2003; Brown, *et al.,* 2005; Preston and Jones, 2006). Furthermore it is argued that this parlous situation affects both humanity and nature with triple-bottom-

line (TBL) social/environmental/economic effects (McMichael, 2001; Diamond, 2005). TBL consequences include: the dissolution of community (Roseland, 1998) and its disempowerment (Ristock and Pennell, 1996; Bookchin, 2005); degradation of aboriginal societies (Sinatra and Murphy, 1999); effects on the natural environment, such as loss of biodiversity, pollution and loss of ecosystems (Shiva, 1993; WRI, 2003); the skewing of human ethics (Singer, 2002); impacts on women (Sen, 1994); weakening our economic structure (Hawken, *et al.* 2000; Albert, 2003); adverse bearings on human health (McMichael, 2001; Brown, *et al.,* 2005); and a worsening 'North-South' dichotomy (Anderson, 2000; WRI, 2003).

Sustainability discourse moves beyond an environmental approach that simply aims to describe and correct humanity's past errors, to a position of developing future-oriented theories and processes. A critical aspect of the sustainability discourse is that it places an emphasis on action at the local level, in these social formations: government authorities, corporations, Non Government Organisations (NGOs) and citizens (Brown, 1997; Harris and Chu, 2001; Andrew and Robottom, 2005). Notions of civil and civic governance come into play as the above social formations interact, with the term 'governance' meaning all forms of decision-making, not just those of governments or courts. Andrew and Robottom (2005) emphasise that how governance is viewed and how it is expressed depends largely on how the more powerful social formations (governments, corporations) include lesser-powered actors (NGOs, citizens) in decision-making processes. Brown and Pitcher (2005) stress that, however well intentioned, engaging all 'interested' parties in the decision making process should be seen as a matter for negotiation.

Public participation is a critical part of the sustainability project, as advocated by the United Nation's two *Earth Summits* at Rio in 1992 and Johannesburg in 2002 (Buckingham, 2003; WRI, 2003). This theme was explored at the first United Nations conference that focused on public participation, the *International Conference on Engaging Communities* at Brisbane in 2005 (UNO, 2005). This emphasis is supported by NSW State government legislation through the Local Government Act 1993 (Farrier and Stein, 2006). Furthermore according to Edwards (2005) increased public participation in sustainability issues is the focus of many of the citizens of the world. For Western Sydney, the literature has described only one model that has been developed specifically for the region, although several councils have incorporated elements of other models (Parissi, 2006). The model identified is Brown's (2001) Pressure-State-Response-Potential Model of sustainability reporting for the *Western Sydney Regional State of the Environment Report 2000* (WS-ROC, 2000; Parissi, 2003, 2005).

The focus of this paper is to explore the imperative of sustainability in its location at the local level. One of the questions that my research explores and is addressed here is, 'how does the practice of governance respond to sustainability in relation to public participation?'. Or, as I have put it elsewhere, *"How does this impetus for positioning sustainability at the local level manifest itself in terms of praxis, that is, in the terrain where theory, practice and effect interact?"*(Parissi, 2005). This is the terrain where our journey with Liverpool's Partnership Project is undertaken.

Packing for the journey: My approach

My research is broadly framed within a qualitative research tradition (Creswell, 1994). This study is ethnographic in approach as it examines real people within their natural settings. Subsequently my research looks upon the community of Liverpool in relation to the Partnership Project as a window *"…to gain a comprehensive and complete picture of a social group"* (Fetterman, 1998: 19). This approach was adopted for, as Robson (1993: 149) states, an ethnographic case study allows emergent qualities to unfold, where *"…the main purpose is exploratory"*. This is important as there was no effective model for Western Sydney, as the other model dealt with environmental reporting. A new model came about during the research. Secondly, as the core of the Project was to foment change, then aspects of Critical Ethnography came into play. Furthermore, due to the Project's iterative nature, the approach of Action Research also plays a part in the story (Creswell, 1994).

Although not an employee of Council, I was not an impartial observer, but participated in planning processes of engagement within and between community and council, in developing concrete outputs, and in aspects of evaluation. Besides conducting numerous interviews, the principal methods for data collection were participant observation, interview, and document analysis. In all, my participation included about 140 meetings (planning, data processing, and reflective-evaluation), 16 community visioning workshops, 10 corporate planning workshops and 6 public meetings. Document analysis consisted of examining the output of the steering committee, newspaper articles, council papers and State government records.

The journey's setting

Figure 1 shows the Liverpool local government area (LGA) extending for about 30 kilometres, along the east-west axis of the Sydney Basin, covering about 305km^2 (Keating, 1996). 'Blaxland Ridge' divides the area in two, with rainfall heavier in the east, as is population density. About 25% of the region is wilderness (mostly the south-eastern Holsworthy Military area), 40% is rural (west) and 35% is urban (east) (WSROC, 2005a).

In 2005 the LGA had an estimated 170,192 residents, this was the second youngest population of any LGA in NSW (ABS, 2006). Over 40% were born in a non-English speaking country, conversing in one or more of 125 different languages (LCC, 2004). Already the fastest growing council in NSW (LCC, 2004), the State government has designated Liverpool to be one of five growth centres, one which will support 115,000 new dwellings to 2031; over that time Liverpool will absorb about 20% of Sydney's population growth (GCC, 2006).

A journey undertaken: The partnership project

Following the Public Inquiry into Liverpool City Council, the Partnership Project was an important component of the Administrator's plan to improve the governance of Liverpool after the Inquiry identified this as being deficient (Kibble, 2004). A small Strategic Planning group within Council was delegated to organise what was to become the Project, and volunteers were called for from within the organisation. The steering committee 'the Team' first met on the 15th June
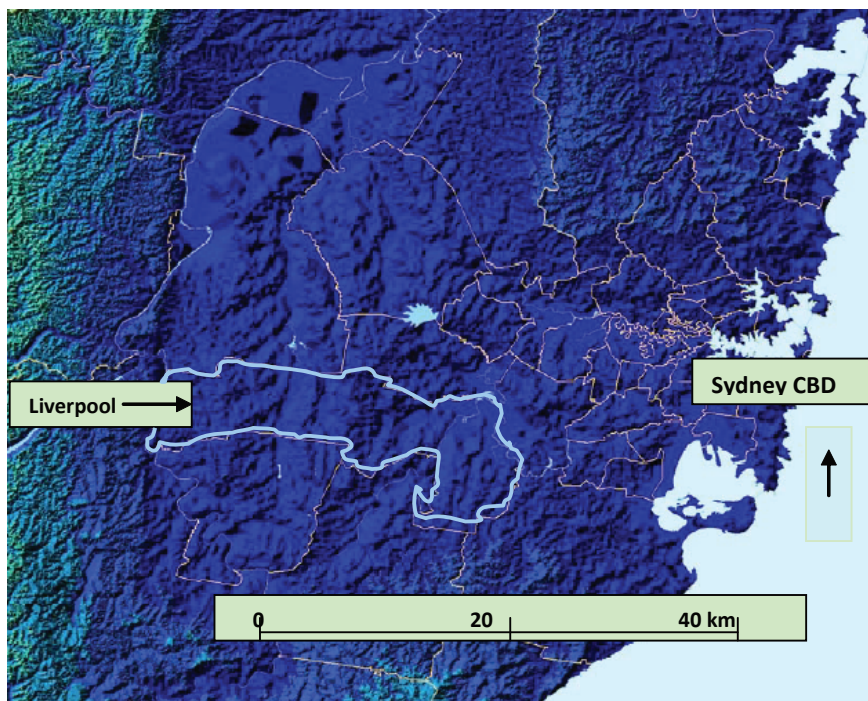
Figure 1 *Sydney Basin and its Surrounds, Showing Topographic Relief and Local Government Area Boundaries (Source: Western Sydney Regional Organisation of Councils, modified by author, WSROC 2005b)*

2004 and I joined it on the 29th.

These initial meetings set the foundation for the Project, with Team members stating that they wanted something different, ethically grounded, with meaningful public participation. They wanted to have a significant affect on how 'Liverpool works', and have the community produce an 'effective plan'. At one of the first meetings, some of the comments were *"It's our strategic plan…it will mean a lot and not just be nice,…[but]… something to have faith in…"*, *"Something to make decisions by…"*, *"…the journey doesn't stop, there will be future renewal, keep the people informed even after the plan is completed and put out…"*, so the Team included an ongoing iterative/reflective element to the plan. It was to have an inclusive ethos, with contributors *"…from the cross-section of our population, involve the Administrator, residents and others…"*. A consistent aim of the Team was to produce a plan that was "Community owned, and Council led".

In addition to this 'idealistic' enthusiasm, there was also a deep realism, with constraining factors noted, such as *"…budgets, State government decisions… inertia, status quo…"* that would necessitate the Council officers needing to *"…take the vision for Liverpool and build solutions mediated by all sorts of practical, institutional, political, etc constraints…"*. There was also trepidation, for nothing like this had been tried at Liverpool. It was commented that, considering the nature of the community and of the recent Oasis scandal, *"…people are cynical and apathetic towards Council"*. One of the tasks was to regain the trust of the community in Coun-

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cil processes which meant that work had to be done to change both that culture of 'apathy' and the organisational culture within Council. These objectives were to be achieved through a framework that included an ongoing community engagement structure linked to the outcomes of the Project (as distinct from existing Neighbourhood Forums).

The Team reported to the Executive Board, the General Manager and the Administrator/Council and organised a series of sub-groups for publicity, public-workshop planning, corporate-change planning, and data analysis. The Project's initial timetable was for six months, but due to the small budget, the part-time nature of the work, the need to negotiate with higher levels of Council, and many ad hoc organisational problems, delays were experienced. Two main streams of activity were initiated: the development of a Community Vision for Liverpool and an internal Council Culture Change program.

Community engagement begins

Following eight months of planning, in February of 2005 Stakeholder Briefing Sessions took place. Another two months of effort produced the main facilitated Visioning workshops for all who '*lived, learned, worked or played in Liverpool*', between May and July, heralded by a flurry of promotional activity. A pilot workshop was held on 27th May for 21 Council workers, most of who lived in the area. The month of June was taken up by nine publicly-open events and two for special-interest groups ('youth' and 'newly arrived migrants'), followed by a disabled-persons workshop on 4th July. In all, 13 sessions of three and a half hours were held at different times of the day, on week-days and week-ends, across the length and breadth of the LGA, for a total of 79 participants. In addition there were 110 interviews, 80 submissions from a Schools Program, and 30 involved in the Stakeholders Briefing. Including the Pilot workshop, 320 participants provided qualitative data. This data was supported by information derived from externally-conducted quantitative surveys in 2004 and 2005 that together elicited 1,170 responses from 5,000 randomly selected residents.

Several drafts of the document, called "Liverpool Directions 2006-2016", were constructed and approval of the document was negotiated with Senior Council. *Liverpool Directions 2006-2016* was endorsed by Council on 10th April, 2006. This represented the conclusion of Stage 1 of the *Creating Our Future Together Partnership Project,* a process planned for repetition in subsequent years.

The second stream of activity was the Council Cultural Change Program. This began with an all-staff launch in October 2004 conducted by the Administrator, and was soon followed by 'Corporate Planning Workshops'. These workshops introduced department managers and other staff to the Project, and began a process of *'Integrated Strategic Planning'*. One council officer stated that this process was moving from a position *"…of having managers sitting at their separate desks formulating their section's budget and then Council stapling all these together as the Corporate Plan. Each department silo is talking to itself, one section can't understand the jargon of the other; what hope is there for the average resident to understand?'* The aim was to move to where, *"We have all the departments sit at a round table and be informed by the community's priorities".* The first Corporate Planning Workshops

cleared the path by getting managers together, rationalising the Corporate Plan document, simplifying language and adopting a unified structure for the document. Although much work was done in the meanwhile, the next workshops were held a year later, in 2005 and incorporated the preliminary outcomes of the community Visioning Workshops into a first attempt at an integrated Strategic Plan.

The Liverpool model

From the research I have identified seven major elements of the Liverpool Model:

* A Community Visioning process and document;
* A Corporate Plan/Council Cultural Change program (Integrated Strategic Planning);
* A Community Cultural Change process, with both the council and the community forming an evolving team where both are learner/teacher;
* A framework of the Triple Bottom Line;
* Linking of the Community Vision to the Strategic Plan;
* An on-going community engagement structure, and
* A staged iterative process of review and development.

Unpacking the journey

Most features of the Liverpool Model have been put into effect, although not all, and not all optimally. The Vision (Directions) document has been created and validated by the community; it has been published and is available on the Council website (LCC, 2006). The Corporate Planning/Cultural Change process has several successes and is progressing well towards its next incarnation for the 2006/07 budget. An extensive internal evaluation has been undertaken, including a celebratory lunch where we exchanged initial impressions of the Project. Finally, considerations for the next stage of the iterative process has begun as a part of the next Corporate Plan and as part of the reflective evaluation process.

Several limitations of the Project have surfaced. These include the lack of an ongoing engagement structure that was distinct from the current Neighbourhood Forums. The new structure was to include a capacity to monitor the uptake of the Directions document into the workings of Council, and be a vehicle for the community to progress the outcomes of the Project. A Consultation Toolkit was developed, exhibited and adopted by Council. Although a positive and necessary outcome in itself, this approach limits the engagement process to a toolkit that is the province of Council officers and not the community.

Another issue is that a TBL/Sustainability framework was not adopted for the Directions document. TBL issues were acknowledged as points within the document only. Sustainability was sent back to its council silo of the Sustainable Environment and Health department when it was decided that this department's development of a Sustainability Policy for Council would replace the previous approach. This limited the capacity of the Project to foster sustainability as part of its cultural change program. Also, an external evaluation was not undertaken, rather, an inter-

nal review process was adopted; this, however valuable, was not the same thing. The internal process did not allow for the establishment of a benchmark analysis of where Liverpool was with regard to the aims of the Project, limiting its ability to assess progress flowing from the Project.

Tentative conclusions

The development of the Liverpool Model shows a possible way forward for local governments that seek to encourage an active and engaged community. An improvement in efficiency was achieved, but what of attempting fundamental change in the governance procedures of Liverpool? Had a TBL/Sustainability framework been adopted for the Directions document and then for the future incarnations of the Project, and had a specific community engagement structure emerged, it would have given greater potency to the process. Both Council and community would have been in a better position to challenge each other in a collaborative effort to further the aims of achieving a more sustainable Liverpool based on improvements in its TBL. These outcomes are yet possible as the process of continuous review and its ongoing iterative nature, promote new opportunities and open paths to innovative solutions.

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Acknowledgements

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