Future-oriented community consultation and planning

Dr Martin Mulligan
Director, Globalism Research Centre
RMIT University, Melbourne
martin.mulligan@rmit.edu.au
Two starting points

- **Community is rarely a dispassionate subject** ... and that is how it needs to be. It is a search for a secure sense of belonging in an increasingly insecure world (Rose 1999, Bauman 2001, Delanty 2003).

- **Community is often backward- and inward-looking** ... and that is NOT the way it needs to be. In the face of global challenges, parochialism is becoming less and less tenable and more and more dangerous.
Four ‘core considerations’

- A better understanding of **community formation** in the contemporary world.
- An **inter-generational** understanding of community.
- A better understanding of **local-global linkages**.
- Considerations of **equity** in the way that community can operate at all levels from the local to the national to the global.
Community formation

- Community is not a social structure but a set of contestable claims about identity and belonging. It is no longer a ‘given’ in the contemporary world.

- A sense of community needs to be constantly created and recreated in response to changing circumstances, i.e. a dynamic sense of community formation.

- Community can be divisive or inclusive and Gerard Delanty has urged that we aim to ‘wilfully construct inclusive communities’.

- Social diversity increases resilience and adaptability in the face of constant change and uncertainty, much of which is global in origin.
Inter-generational thinking

- Thinking our way into the future and what kinds of opportunities will our children or grandchildren face.

- Community consultations about the future of logging in the Wombat Forest near Daylesford, Victoria, were led by a well-regarded community development worker and a second-generation sawmill owner who had concluded that his children had better futures outside the logging industry.

- A scenarios mapping exercise in the Hamilton region of Victoria (related to likely impacts of climate change) engaged the community more effectively when two local writers turned the future scenarios into four future stories with believable local characters. Will community pull together or fall apart?
Community at times of crisis

- Local communities sometimes rally magnificently in the wake of a disaster (e.g. bushfires). But it is hard to maintain the spirit of community when harsh realities set in.

- More could and should be done to sustain the spirit of community once it has been experienced positively.

- An important role here for Local Government Authorities, with support from other levels of government. See our work on ‘governance and the turn to community’.
Local-global linkages

- Cannot escape intrusions of ‘the global’, e.g. Global Financial Crisis, Climate Change, ‘Peak Oil’.

- Communities and nations that are proactive rather than reactive will do better (Nicholas Stern).

- For reasons of geography, history and population size Australia has entrenched forms of insularity, which feeds parochialism.

- Need to promote examples of proactive local initiatives, e.g. Castlemaine and its booming local economy or the Coleraine Enterprise in south-western Victoria.

- ‘Transitions Towns’ is one example of useful global networks for local action.
Considerations of equity

- Of course, not all problems can be fixed locally and we must share the cost of action taken for the public good.
- May need to do more work on alternative plans for employment and economic development. Broader thinking about household livelihoods and ‘food security’.
- Need more transition planning and relocation planning. Relocation is likely to be posed more often in the future (ie an orderly retreat from environmentally vulnerable areas).
- Perhaps we will need relocation funds and supporting taxes at national and global levels.
- Key principle is transparent equity, see our post-tsunami study at www.rmit.edu.au/globalism/publications/reports
Valuing good practice in community development

- There are many good community development workers in Australia but this field of practice deserves higher recognition and investment.

- Good practice in community development is all about creating more inclusive local communities to make them more resilient and adaptive to future challenges.

- As Gerard Delanty has put it (2003, p. 195)

  *Community offers people what neither the state nor society can offer, namely a sense of belonging in an insecure world.*
References

