

# **Making Meaning Together — New Approaches to Governance and Community in Modern Democracies**

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## **Abstract**

The aim of this paper is to show that establishing meaningful expressions of community experiences and aspirations through community engagement can and should effectively contribute to the "framing" of government policy activity. The term "community engagement" must include the interpretation of people's subjective experience of their surroundings and their awareness of the long-term impact and potentialities in their lives. A comprehensive approach to community engagement will have long-term benefits for government and industry such as ensuring that developments are welcomed, sustainable and able to utilise community potentialities.

The paper will take an interdisciplinary approach to examine the work of a range of authors on civic engagement, community, identity, democracy, public policy and philosophical hermeneutics to show that governments in modern democracies must also take account of, and provide a voice for, the experiences of different groups that coexist in urban, rural and regional environments.

It will demonstrate that effective, interpretive community engagement can be a vehicle for policymakers to become more aware of the problem-setting nature of the frames in which they operate.

Community engagement can be used as a form of value critical policy inquiry whereby the diverse views of affected people can be incorporated in the meanings and interpretations of government decision-makers. While both community participation and community emancipation from elitist power structures are becoming widely accepted within community engagement theory, current dominant frames often lead practice back to reductionist solutions. People's participation in accordance with their shared meanings will contribute long term benefits to developers, governments and communities if greater wisdom about the process of meaning formation and expression is added to our practitioners' technical resources.

## **Keywords**

Community engagement, sustainability, public policy, democracy, practice

## **Introduction**

We argue in this paper that establishing meaningful expressions of community experiences and aspirations through community engagement can and should effectively contribute to the "framing"

of government policy activity. We first position our understanding of meaning creation within the fields of hermeneutics, community and cultural meanings, interdisciplinary tensions and power relationships and present the preconditions for successful community engagement in the light of these theories. We then suggest there are limitations to success, which are in part a function of modern democratic and policy processes themselves. Lastly we examine the way in which practitioners are attempting to create meaningful expressions of community experiences and aspirations, through case studies of sustainable development, participatory social impact assessments and participatory forums.

### **Community engagement: Theory and practice**

We would like to suggest that the term "community engagement" has to include an understanding of people's shared subjective identification of their surroundings and their awareness of the long-term impact and potentialities that those surroundings have in their lives. A comprehensive and useful approach to community engagement will involve sensitivity to shared understandings, but will also have long-term benefits for government and industry in terms of ensuring that developments are welcomed, sustainable and able to utilise community potentialities.

In order to understand the way in which shared meaning is created in communities we identify and overview below four theoretical concepts that deal with the creation of meaning: community and cultural identity, hermeneutics, interdisciplinary tensions and power relationships.

#### ***Community and cultural identity***

Communities are not homogeneous entities with a single set of values and aspirations. Increasingly, communities are made up of many different groups of people with interests that converge and conflict at different times (Peddie 1996). There are many differences within communities. Beginning with Indigenous people, Australian society has grown to include colonists and migrants from every part of the world, each bringing different identities and understandings.

Young (1990) describes modern societies as different groups dwelling alongside one another, of necessity interacting in the same spatial frame. The same space may therefore hold different meanings for different people. Senior citizens, foreign students and the local ballet school may all use the local parish hall, but the hall may not hold the same religious significance for these people as it would for those who worship there.

In some cases the meanings given to a place are contested. For example, indigenous significance given to a sacred site that may also be seen as a potential mine site. If politics are democratic, and not dominated by one point of view, they will take account of, and provide voices for, the different groups that dwell together without forming a community of place (Young 1990).

Conversely, shared meaning is not necessarily connected to place. Community and cultural identity can develop around shared interests, religion, ethnicity, sexual or orientation. Electronic media has meant that such virtual communities with shared meaning are global in their scope.

Community engagement that does not recognise the potential for a place to have multiple meanings for diverse groups, or the existence of meaningful identity that is not attached to place will not be providing for a full range of voices to be heard.

The meanings that people, share, don't share, or are in the process of developing as shared, are therefore important considerations in the theory and practise of community engagement.

### ***Hermeneutics***

Variations in meaning among both groups and individuals, and ways in which these different 'voices' can be heard, are two concepts examined in philosophical hermeneutics (Taylor 1979; Bauman 1992).

In philosophical hermeneutics, reaching understanding involves interaction between the "given" and its wider context, an iterative process called the hermeneutic circle. Instead of uni-linear progress towards better and less vulnerable knowledge, the hermeneutic process consists of a constantly renewed recapitulation and reassessment of collective memories (Bauman 1992, p. 17). There is a continual movement between the "part" about which understanding is being reached, and the "whole", or context in which the part exists. In philosophical hermeneutics as it relates to literature, it is the establishment of reading or understanding of the whole text, which is being attempted. To do this, appeals are made to partial expressions. But because partial expressions only make sense in relation to other expressions, other expressions and ultimately the whole text must also be considered. (Taylor 1979, p. 28). The same process applies to general understanding and interpretation in day-to-day life. In community engagement, the "partial expressions" are the voices of individuals and groups within the community, and the broad community can be seen as the "whole text".

### ***Interdisciplinary tensions***

The interdisciplinary nature of community engagement is such that it spans both the sciences and humanities in a methodological, as well as an epistemological, sense. Disciplinary conflicts and resolutions emerge at a very practical level in teams working on social, economic and environmental concerns raised through engagement, despite, or rather because of, the absence of explicit theoretical discussion. In general, real-world problems are not disciplinary in their make-up: they are interdisciplinary, and need to be formulated and solved as such.

The idea that there may be legitimate, alternate ways of viewing the same information has, in some cases, been presented as a crisis in social sciences (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979, p. 2). Social

investigators have never achieved the same degree of agreement about basic elements that can be found in the natural sciences (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979, p. 2). It has now largely been acknowledged in the social sciences that to comprehend the human world, there needs to be a focus on cultural meanings — the languages, symbols and institutions which affect peoples behaviour, and the tools by which such investigation proceeds. Since meaning cannot be reduced to predefined elements, any analogy between social and natural sciences is misleading. Intentions and empathy, for example, are dependent on the prior existence of a shared world of meanings within which humans constitute themselves (Rabinow and Sullivan 1979, p. 5).

For example, teams contracted to work on the environmental and social impacts of a proposal may include a combination of geologists, anthropologists, engineers, biologists and planners, or any number of professionals using both positivist and normative approaches. Each team member contributes his or her own disciplinary perspective to the final report, which is a combination of many different technical reports (Beckwith 1993). Efforts must be made by each practitioner to understand the contribution and perspective of the other. This is because the findings of one professional and consequent interpretation of significance may in turn affect the work of another.

A marine biologist might be required to explain, in both scientific and lay terms, how marine life would be affected by a proposed project. In turn, a cultural anthropologist might need to understand the nature of these effects in order to ensure that local people appreciate how the project would affect their use of that area.

### ***Relationships between the 'researcher' and the 'researched'***

There are rarely structures put in place in the research or decision-making process to ensure that the 'researched' are able to retain control over the information they give to a 'researcher' (for a more detailed discussion of these issues see Stocker and Pollard 1994). Researchers, moreover, are usually from specific disciplines. Psychologists generally collect data by surveys or in controlled experiment settings, social scientists use surveys or questionnaires and cultural anthropologists use participant observation. Although many of these data collection methods, especially participatory approaches, involve the consent and participation of individual community members, the power relationship between the 'researcher' and the 'researched' varies widely. There has been no uniform way of encouraging participation, or of ensuring equitable power relations. The 'researched' may be expected to give up their time and expertise for no reward, while the researcher may expect financial or academic reward for his/her efforts. In addition, the 'researched' may risk losing control over how the information they give is presented and interpreted, so that the end result does not reflect their perspective, or the meaning which they understand to be true. Alternately, if the 'researched' refuse to participate, they risk becoming uninformed about the proposal, and perhaps losing any influence over how or whether the proposal will proceed. So a power dynamic exists between the "researched" (the community) and the "researcher" (government or academe).

The 'researcher' can amend this situation in a number of ways. First, as Karl Mannheim (1936) has suggested in conceptualising 'relationism' as a solution to the pitfalls of both subjective and objective epistemologies, the researcher should seek to understand exactly how he or she relates to the system or community that is being researched. How do the researcher's own political bias, government status, socio-economic status, affect his or her perception and interpretation of the community's aspirations and self-representations? The researcher may or may not make this study of relationism explicit in a final report, but the understanding should be developed.

Second, the researcher may invite the researched community into the methodological development of the research project at an early stage. The researcher may ask the community how they would like to convey the meaning of their world to the researcher. In an early example of this process, Helen Ross (1987) sought from an Aboriginal community in Ruddall River, WA, their views on how a uranium mine would affect their lives. She found that they did not want to participate in a standard interview process but instead wanted to tell their dreaming stories. From this we can learn that the meaning of this community's world can only be apprehended from the cultural, spiritual and biophysical account given in their creation stories.

Third, in some cases the researcher and the researched may negotiate a deal about a fair exchange of resources. The researcher may be in a position to provide information, time or other resources in exchange for the time and effort provided to him or her (for examples see Stocker and Pollard 1994; Nichols 2000).

### ***Preconditions for comprehensive, meaning-creating community engagement***

In synthesising the main elements of the theoretical concepts presented above, we assert that there are four preconditions to success in establishing meaningful expressions of community experiences and aspirations through community engagement. These are:

- 1) The prior recognition of a shared world of meanings within which humans constitute themselves should be acknowledged. However, while 'place' and peoples connections to place are often important, it should not be assumed that shared meaning is always connected to place. Cultural and community identity can come from shared interests, religions, sexual orientation or ethnicity, and may be global in scope.
- 2) Variations in meaning among both groups and individuals, and ways in which these different 'voices' can be heard should be explicitly accounted for. We seek to understand how voices or 'partial texts' interact and contribute to the 'whole text' of negotiated meaning.
- 3) Community-based issues need a self-reflexive, interdisciplinary (not merely a multidisciplinary) approach to provide both technical information and critical and interpretive perspectives on the issues.

- 4) The relationships, including the power dynamic, that exists between the “researched” and the “researcher” should be acknowledged and where possible mitigated.

Meeting these preconditions involves and supports reflexive, critical and iterative forms of inquiry with a corresponding emphasis on meanings, interpretation and understanding. Attention should be given to shared community meanings and local interpretations including specifying the methods or techniques by which their expression has to be achieved.

Giving scope to community "voices" in an engagement process should be the focus of whatever disciplinary approaches are available. The methods and techniques needed in conducting a hermeneutic inquiry are available from a variety of disciplines; but applying them from an orientation respecting access to shared community meaning as a technical goal is aimed at resolving participation and technocratic rigour into a synthesis.

### **Constraints on achieving the preconditions for community engagement**

Having set out what we consider to be the pre-conditions for success, we now begin to identify some of the factors that limit the ability of practitioners to achieve these preconditions. The limitations go some way to explaining lack of success in many well-intentioned community engagement processes.

### ***Representative democracy — The issues***

Although ‘representative democracy’ as a socio-political ideal has few critics in contemporary western countries, its actual implementation and interpretation is complex and contested (Gutmann 1993). Weakest forms of democracy are ‘procedurally minimalist’ and require only an institutional arrangement whereby individuals acquire the power to make political decisions by a competitive struggle for the vote of at least some adult citizens, and are thereby deemed to be the people’s representatives. Stronger forms of democracy can also include: free expression, the rule of law, voting equality and universal suffrage (Gutmann 1993).

Problems with representative democracy include, but are not limited to:

- Elections are only held every three to four years, limiting the issues upon which the community can become involved
- Elections are often fought on single issues, leaving other concerns unaddressed
- Local issues may not be addressed or may be exploited in pork-barrelling
- Majorities can over-rule the needs of oppressed minorities
- Voting equality may not result in actual equality of influence on outcomes
- Suffrage may not be universal.

In the ongoing struggle to define and implement democracy, the tension between the autonomy and rights of individuals versus the ideal of popular participation in politics has been paramount.

### ***Participatory democracy — The issues***

The role of manipulation and exploitation of mass participation in establishing facism post-WWI in Germany has not been forgotten, but participatory democracy has nevertheless been reinvented as a useful complement to cope with the above limitations with minimalist representative democracy since late 1960s (Pateman 1970).

Participatory democracy has found recent expression in many ways and one current process is known as community engagement. Much has been made of the role of community engagement in natural resource management, planning, policy development and allied programs. Community engagement is one way in which the needs of all peoples can theoretically be met, including those of future generations. It can be deployed locally on relatively small issues. It can involve people who cannot vote such as children, or minority groups for whom representation is ineffective. Community members can be engaged in a process by government or industry or can choose to initiate a process themselves.

Difficulties arise in participatory democracy, however. As Pieterse (2001) has commented, there is no single model for participatory democracy or how it should operate. There is no definitively successful process that can be reproduced, or even modified, for all users in all times and places. Pieterse (2001) comments in his review that the literature is replete with terms such as deliberative democracy, communicative democracy and direct democracy which have different theoretical pedigrees and different but related meanings. The weakness of many kinds of participatory democracy is that, as Iris Marion Young (1990) has pointed out, the quiet oppressed voices are still not heard; and the loud powerful voices get yet another platform.

We argue that in order to avoid the pitfalls of mass participation and the domination of public engagement processes by powerful elites, community engagement must emphasise communication, deliberation and negotiation to create shared understandings of meaning. Community engagement must critique and continually improve its own methodology in the search for fairer, more informed and more emancipatory outcomes. Some of these critiques are set out below.

We can often see variations in meaning among both groups and individuals and these have not been accounted for fully, despite consultation. Iris Marion Young (2003) supports the idea of group representation in decision-making because it is an antidote to self-deceiving self-interest masked as an impartial or general interest. Group representation can certainly go some way towards balancing a majority of individuals over-ruling a minority of individuals as in popular representative democracy. However, group representation can also be flawed. An advisory group, for example, may contain representatives from several different commercial interests but only one representative from a single conservation group, or a single Indigenous group. This situation

reflects a subjective bias in meaning on the part of the minister or individual choosing the representatives. If economic meaning is given more weight, the committee can be stacked with commercial stakeholders. In the unlikely event that conservation meaning is given more weight, the committee can be stacked with conservationists. Furthermore, the 'representatives' are usually appointed not elected and may not actually have the time or resources to identify and integrate the views of their own 'constituency'. Intra-group differences may occur and these too may reflect different needs, even intra-group oppressions and power plays. That is, in participatory democracy through group representation, pseudo-representation can become a problem.

It is important that groups and individuals hear each other's points of view, as these deliberative processes themselves, as well as their informational content, can contribute to a shared meaning.

### ***Policy activity — The issues***

Literature from the public policy field has been examining ways in which public policy can better respond to developmental needs in communities. Such academic research in the field of public policy has and will continue to influence the practice of community engagement.

Considine (1994), for example, proposes two scenarios for policy making. In the first, policy seeks to limit and complete action, participation being primarily a means to gain clearance for an efficient policy decision: i.e. exchange is purely instrumental. In the second, policy making as a process is a valued transaction in its own right: i.e. a developmental relationship is implied. Considine suggests that transforming the process from instrumental exchange to a developmental relationship, when there is some participation of groups in making policy, rests on how involvement is structured (Considine 1994, p. 132).

Considine's view of the role of participation contains propositions that are clearly in line with the preconditions for the creation of shared meaning as outlined above. Participation in Considine's view also has both an instrumental and developmental value. The instrumental aspect can be found in the observable ways in which decision-making or plans are improved. The developmental value of participation is the effect upon present capacities within a system or community. Developmental values include increased knowledge, increased solidarity, greater understanding, and trust.

Rein's (1993) suggestion that policy makers should see the world in terms of frames is also of relevance to this discussion. A central element in Rein's account of value-critical policy analysis is the participation of people in the process in order to initiate self-reflection. A frame is a way of understanding the things we say, see and act on; it integrates theory, facts, values and interests. Thus frames are broader than theories. Rein suggested that public policy be analysed from a value-critical reference frame that would involve shifts in perception. Rein has described policy



analysis as a task of bringing evidence and interpretation to bear on decision-making and social practice, thereby allowing the 'frames' on which the process depends to shift.

Rein shows that most policy analysts take a certain frame as non-problematic and work within that established frame to interpret what actions should follow. He advocates, by contrast, policy analysts becoming more self-aware of the use of frames in policy analysis and therefore becoming more explicit about the perspectives they themselves bring to bear in the frames that they habitually use.

Paris and Reynolds (1983) also show that the primary concern of policy analysis should be the soundness and the acceptability of the premises upon which policy decisions are made. Elaborating new frames is a key function for policy makers in which community engagement can play a major role.

The exercise of making shifts in understanding and perception, and in forming new relationships, is not new to policy analysis. It is usually left, however, to unions, industry research groups, lobby groups, active individuals and politicians, and is often viewed cynically as 'horse trading' or 'pork barrelling'. Certainly these kinds of interactions are rarely self-conscious community engagement processes. They are usually lacking in technical expertise (except perhaps in polling) and are rarely comprehensive in establishing new relationships with all key stakeholders, and are still less often open and transparent.

Community engagement that "makes meaning" avoids the simplistic trap of presenting "facts" for policy analysis in the way technocratic community engagement exercise does. It potentially changes the premise upon which policies are made because it offers information that has been interpreted by other stakeholders. Therefore community engagement that makes meaning carries inherent problems for government policy processes. It shows how a variety of interpretations may be in competition over the same data. The "facts" may be presented in several different ways. This has important consequences. First, governments may be forced to reconsider basic elements of planned policies or developments to which they were politically committed. Second, a diversity of interpretations by various stakeholders makes the identification of a single option difficult.

Despite advances in theories of policy-making, the practical action that accompanies policy-making continues to set conditions for what community engagement will achieve. "Developmental" policy as described by Considine and the influencing of the "frames" described by Rein is time and resource intensive and does not always sit easily with the realities of decision-making and political expediency. In addition, the current epistemological focus in government decision-making relies on objective fact, underlying the way in which 'technocratic' is conceived, and repeating the positivist stance widely criticised since the 1970s.

At its best, however, community engagement can clearly be used as of the basis for value-critical policy inquiry whereby the diverse views of affected people can be incorporated in the meanings and interpretations of government policy-makers who can at the same time become more aware of the problem-setting nature of the frames in which they operate.

### **Community engagement: Practice issues**

We will now aim to demonstrate the relevance of the above discussions to current practice in community engagement by examining the community engagement preconditions, policy and democratic contexts for selected approaches to community engagement

### ***Sustainable development — Place and participation***

While we may yearn for an unequivocal sense of place and sense of belonging, the reality of a shared world is one of conflict and politics. Any colonised country such as Australia has at its foundation a clash of meaning and power (Hayden 1995). All subsequent experiences, including stolen generations, immigration, land degradation and pollution, have led to increasing ambiguity, partiality, contest and even pain, not least for Indigenous peoples (Langton 1998). Reconciliation in the fullest sense must therefore lie at the foundation of any successful attempt to share meaning and achieve sustainability. Sustainable development may offer an envelope of values that, however vague, can at least provide a shared starting point for deliberations. It has an international mandate (for review, see UNEP 2002), a national mandate (Commonwealth of Australia 1992); and in some cases state (WA State Government 2003) and local governments have also embraced sustainability principles in mission statements, planning and policies. The details of sustainability are of course fundamentally contestable (Jacobs 1999). However, the rights and responsibilities of communities, including their most vulnerable members, to determine their own futures is set out in seminal sustainability principles (UNCED 1992) and has been repeated with varying degrees of depth and emphasis in most sustainable development policy documents.

In relation to analysis and collection of knowledge for policy development, plenty of technical information is required for sustainable development. However, approaches to sustainability that are strictly based on environmental science alone, or for that matter on economics or social justice alone, cannot provide a basis for sustainable living. Rather, we need to look for answers that integrate the economic, ecological, social and cultural dimensions of our world. But even an interdisciplinarity is inadequate if it is purely a desktop approach.

Participation, or rather a passionate dialogue, is also fundamental (Warburton 1998). Community or civic science is one method by which participation and technical processes can be brought together in sustainable development (Stocker 1995; O’Riordan 1998). In community science projects, such as the various riverwatch and bushwatch programs, partnerships between professional scientists and community groups can generate policy-relevant information for sustainable development about

a place that neither group could generate alone (Stocker 1995; O’Riordan 1998). Partnerships between Indigenous knowledges and Western scientific procedures are another means to reconcile understandings of a cultural landscape like Australia’s, and to find shared meaning and sustainability in a colonised country (Dodson 1995). Shared understandings can result in appropriate policies such as those relating to land use and intellectual property rights over plant use and other cultural knowledge. These approaches to sharing knowledge require meta-views of meaning because they embrace cosmological and ontological differences as well as epistemological and methodological differences. Learning to share knowledge and meaning is a long journey involving fundamental political struggles.

Knowledge, planning and policy partnerships are an interesting way forward in community engagement because they offer real opportunities for capacity building on all sides, and new “frames” for policy development. However, we must closely scrutinise the term “partnership”, as one of the most over-used word and over-blown concepts in public policy today (Langford 2002). The term “partnership” has been used to dress up the most mundane working relationships and the most oppressively one-sided power relationships between community groups and government agencies (Langford 2002). Genuine partnerships involve a recognition of dependency, sharing of power, the pooling of resources, exchange of information, development of trust and mutual respect, and a commitment over the long haul (Langford 2002; Oliver 2002).

In one example of participation in sustainable development, the “Save Ningaloo” experience has shown us that community-initiated campaigns can be more than just anti-development protests. In WA they have set the pace for community engagement. Triggered by the need to stop inappropriate development in Ningaloo Reef region, the Save Ningaloo campaign was formed in 2000. The Save Ningaloo Campaign is a coalition of state, national and international conservation groups. It has engaged tens of thousands of supporters, from businesses in the area to Perth residents to international dive groups. The Save Ningaloo Campaign’s stated aim is: “the long-term protection of the marine and terrestrial environments of the entire Cape Range — Ningaloo Reef region through the robust application of ecological sustainability principles to future development of the area”.<sup>1</sup>

The Save Ningaloo Campaign in WA was a landmark in participatory democracy in which a massive community-based protest called up celebrities such as Luc Longley and Tim Winton; mobilised European diving clubs; and delivered polished presentations. It was highly interactive and used multiple media. It is now recognised as a case study in electronic democracy<sup>2</sup> where interested citizens could find information, register letters of support, and donate money all at one website. In response to the Ningaloo campaign, the government knocked back the proposal for a

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<sup>1</sup> <[http://www.sustainability.dpc.wa.gov.au/docs/submissions/Save\\_Ningaloo\\_Campaign.pdf](http://www.sustainability.dpc.wa.gov.au/docs/submissions/Save_Ningaloo_Campaign.pdf)>.

<sup>2</sup> Viewed 22 March 2005, <[http://www.coastal.crc.org.au/toolbox/casestudies/cs\\_electronicdemocracy.pdf](http://www.coastal.crc.org.au/toolbox/casestudies/cs_electronicdemocracy.pdf)>.

1980s style development near Coral Bay, and furthermore in November 2004 the Department of Conservation and Land Management expanded the sanctuary zones in the Ningaloo Marine Park. Paul Gamblin, Save Ningaloo Campaign spokesperson, said, "By placing 34% of Ningaloo Reef in sanctuary zones, the Western Australian Government has heeded the call of the community and the advice of the world's leading coral reef scientists."<sup>3</sup> Most importantly to its success, the Save Ningaloo campaign offered sustainable policy solutions for land use and tourism development. The WA Planning Commission has responded to the campaign challenge and has developed a Carnarvon-Ningaloo Coast Regional Strategy,<sup>4</sup> with several public consultation phases.<sup>5</sup> The WA State Sustainability Strategy also identified sustainability for the Ningaloo area as a priority.<sup>6</sup>

It can be seen that the incredibly well orchestrated Save Ningaloo Campaign activated a complex and ongoing sustainability planning process in the Ningaloo area, and put paid forever to the notion of conservationists as anti-development disorganised hippies. However, the local community, including Carnarvon, Exmouth and Coral Bay townships and surrounding pastoral stations have been very divided on the future of the area, in terms of levels and types of conservation, accommodation, fishing, pastoralism and Indigenous needs. In a recent study (Ryans Taylor 2004), distinct differences emerged between the towns of Coral Bay and Exmouth, but many residents interviewed felt that government was not meeting their local economic needs with the various planning processes, and they felt that their rights to self-determination as a community had been abandoned in favour of city greenies. This case highlights that the 'community' has local, regional, national and international components. How do we balance the needs and preferences of local communities vs the broader community? How do we *make meaning together* of such diverse opinions, including: people who have never been to a place like Ningaloo — Cape Range but value its very existence as a unique and diverse ecosystem belonging to the world; tourists who visit and value it; Indigenous people to whom the land traditionally belongs; and other locals who have (often conflicting) economic and social needs from their place of residence.

Literature on Social Impact Assessment can be seen as a microcosm of trends in the application of community engagement techniques. In particular, an examination of Australian social impact assessment literature provides an insight into interdisciplinary tensions, and into the power dynamic that exists between the "researched" and the "researcher".

Regular community objections to development proposals reveal a high level of discomfort with the meanings attached to such proposals by their proponents and by government. There is also much literature about the role of the researcher in legitimating powerful interests, rather than as an independent collector of information (Rickson et al. 1988), much less a people's advocate.

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<sup>3</sup> Viewed 22 March 2005, <<http://www.save-ningaloo.org/>>.

<sup>4</sup> <[http://www.wapc.wa.gov.au/carnarvon\\_ningaloo/CNCRS/final/CNCRSfinal.html](http://www.wapc.wa.gov.au/carnarvon_ningaloo/CNCRS/final/CNCRSfinal.html)>.

<sup>5</sup> Viewed 22 March 2005, <[http://www.wapc.wa.gov.au/carnarvon\\_ningaloo/](http://www.wapc.wa.gov.au/carnarvon_ningaloo/)>.

<sup>6</sup> <<http://www.sustainability.dpc.wa.gov.au>>.

These experiences point to a polarity in approaches that has been identified by several authors on social impact assessment (Craig 1988; Howitt 1989; Lane et al. 1993). Those approaches which seek to emphasise meanings and interpretations of the affected communities are called 'political' and 'participatory' approaches. They seek to engage a range of different stakeholders and assume that impacts are only manageable with a community's commitment to construct their social future by negotiation. Other approaches are based on the assumption that social impacts are predictable, and therefore controllable. They seek to provide an empirical assessment of impacts and are called 'technocratic' or 'technical' (Craig 1988). This apparent polarity can better be viewed as a sliding scale of orientation.

While social impact assessments which incorporate meaning and interpretation as well as sound technical data, have been increasingly espoused, (Howitt 1992; Dale and Lane 1994; Taylor et al. 1995), there has been little evidence that such approaches are actively being practised. In fact, tensions become evident when these kinds of approaches are made to fit together somehow in order to inform the decision making process in respect of projects, policies and programs (Craig 1988, 1990; Taylor et al. 1995).

An interaction between the two approaches above has been suggested (Dale and Lane 1994; Taylor et al. 1995), however. Academically rigorous and technically sound data should be used in social impact assessments, and communities should be given the opportunity to construct their social futures using sound and accurate information about a proposed project or program. Dale and Lane (1994) point to the preference for technocratic approaches by development proponents who focus on 'technical' project impacts on human systems. The process of developing an understanding of the multiple social impacts then allows agencies and policy-makers to work out paths for development that accommodate a wider range of the inherent possibilities for the community.

While social impact assessment literature has identified the potential for social impact assessment to contribute to better informed policy development and analysis, there remain few examples of this in academic texts. Pollard (1999) describes ways in which social impact assessments within Western Australia were unable to realise hermeneutic aims while technocratic processes remained insufficiently integrated with a hermeneutic approach.

Community engagement that combines technocratic and interpretive approaches will allow for recognition of wide-ranging cultural and subjective effects that influence the well-being of individuals, communities, regions and indeed whole states.

### ***Participatory forums — Community Cabinet***

Literature about community engagement shows an increasing trend towards the incorporation of participation and community governance models (Reddell and Woolcock 2004). The practice of community engagement, however, has been dominated by approaches which do not allow either for community expression of meaning or for local interpretations (Reddell and Woolcock 2004). Those affected by proposed changes are rarely accommodated as expressive community-identified members by practitioners and decision-makers.

The community cabinet approach operated in Queensland where Cabinet meetings are held in different regional locations, formal and informal deputations from community members are received and discussed, and a range of opportunities for informal discussions with Ministers are provided is an example of Government attempting to broaden and deepen its community engagement processes to incorporate the preconditions for comprehensive, meaning-creating community engagement. The Community Cabinet model is used here to demonstrate opportunities for the preconditions for comprehensive, meaning-creating community engagement identified above, and the limitations imposed by context.

Firstly, Community Cabinet operates in a variety of “places” and allows for a range of individuals and groups to make direct contact with powerful decision-makers; therefore, while acknowledging the importance of place, it does not connect shared meaning solely to place.

Secondly, community Cabinet, by providing a range of opportunities for informal deputations and discussions, acknowledges that there are variations in meaning among both groups and individuals, and ways in which these different 'voices' can be heard (formally and informally). While this acknowledgement is not explicitly accounted for in the process, it is certainly possible.

Thirdly, by providing a mix of formal and informal opportunities to discuss issues, the prior existence of a shared world of meanings within which humans constitute themselves can be acknowledged, if only in the sense that individuals can get a sense of each other through face-to-face meetings. Again, while the acknowledgement of a prior existence of a shared world of meanings is possible at Community Cabinet, it is not explicit and may in fact depend on the interpersonal skills of individual Ministers or community members.

As discussed above, however, the opportunity for practitioners and participants in such an engagement process to achieve the preconditions for comprehensive, meaning-creating community engagement is limited by the contexts and tensions between representative and participatory democracy, and by the practical action that goes hand-in-hand with policy-making.

In particular, individuals and communities have varying capacities to participate. A survey of participants conducted in 1999 found that the profile of people who attended Community Cabinets

tend to have a comprehensive knowledge of community issues, are informed about and interested in the political process and are more likely to participate in community activities (Davis 2001, pp. 226-7).

Second, the representativeness of community interests interacting formally and informally at community cabinets is variable. As Reddell and Woodcock point out “ the ‘badge’ of community is a limited descriptor for the range of organisational forms and perspectives evident in the Queensland initiatives including local networks of service providers, loose alliances of resident action groups, community agencies, peak bodies, regional networks of local government representatives, business leaders and community networks” (Reddell and Woolcock 2004, p. 82).

Finally, the frames of reference used to develop policy are difficult to influence even though of programs such as community Cabinet many be meritorious (Reddell and Woolcock 2004, p. 84). As Reddell and Woolcock argue the long-term impact of citizen engagement on the key political and policy drivers of the Queensland Government remain uncertain.

### **Conclusion**

The preconditions for comprehensive, meaningful community engagement include: the prior recognition of shared meaning, not necessarily connected to place; variations in meaning among groups and individuals; the need for a critical interdisciplinary approach to community issues analysis; and a mitigation of the power dynamic that exists between the ‘researcher’ and the ‘researched’.

It is clear, however, that the context in which decision-making occurs can constrain the preconditions for comprehensive, meaning-creating community engagement in the following ways:

- The bluntness of representative democracy can limit the attention paid to the needs of minorities in local contexts
- The ability of representatives to effectively represent their electorates is variable and changeable
- Individuals and communities do not uniformly have the capacity to participate in processes
- The guidelines for participatory democracy are not well-developed
- Local and larger concerns are often in conflict especially with respect to place
- Policy making tends to be instrumental rather than developmental in its approach
- The frames of reference used to develop policy are in practice rarely value critical or reflexive.

It is argued, however, that comprehensive, meaning-creating community engagement can be a vehicle for policy-makers to become more aware of the problem-setting nature of the frames in which they operate.

We have suggested here that, in order to be able to influence the “frames” upon which policy operates, community engagement needs to build on the 'political' and participatory' approaches in order to emphasise meaning and interpretation, integrate the positivist approaches of the natural sciences with the subjective approaches of the humanities, and in doing so acknowledge of the links between technical and participatory approaches. Government that allows for people's participation and is in accordance with their shared meanings is possible if greater wisdom about the process of meaning formation and expression is added to our practitioners' technical resources.

There are examples of practitioners setting up community engagement approaches that enable some preconditions to be met, but these attempts remain constrained and limited. Nevertheless, practitioners' training that addressed the preconditions for comprehensive, meaning-creating community engagement would go a long way towards a considered approach to meaning, rather than leaving things to the interpersonal skills of certain individuals and chance.

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