

Submission to:

Community Development and Justice Standing Committee: Inquiry into collaborative approaches in government

From:

Peter Demediuk

and
Rolf Solli

A case study of engaging the community in local government decision making

Submission summary

The authors argue that the deliberative processes of engaging the community with decision making by governments that are outlined in this paper should be considered for the Western Australian context since they have the potential to improve service delivery citizens and improve well-being by providing a vehicle for: information sharing; joint learning; better-informed decision making; more robust accountability; strengthening of trust and engagement in democratic processes; and community capacity building.

Introduction

It has been contended by governments in countries such as the UK, Australia, Canada and Sweden that modern society will only reach its potential when citizens individually and collectively are able to use their knowledge and capacity to shape their lives and communities. Consequently, public participation in decision making by governments has become a dominant theme in public sector management and governance (2001).

This paper firstly examines the literature on the nexus between community engagement and government decision making and notes a gap in our knowledge about good practice examples. Secondly the paper offers a case study of community engagement initiatives in a Swedish local government that has gained a reputation for robust and innovative practice. Thirdly, the paper offers

conclusions about this Kommun's initiatives which may inform practice at other councils, and notes areas for future research.

The Victorian State Government in Australia argues that to achieve a genuine and vibrant democracy requires "...greater public participation and more accountable government" (State Government of Victoria, 2005, p. 2) where people "...from all backgrounds will have the opportunity to have a say on issues that matter to them" (p. 20). The goal is to have stakeholders "...more actively involved in decision making through better consultation, increased participation in decisions affecting their local community, and involvement in their local services" (p. 19). Increasing the involvement of local communities in public services is also a major part of the UK Government's modernisation agenda, a regulatory obligation, and part of good management (Audit Commission, 2003). The Canadian Government has deemed that a more robust consultative relationship with the community 'singularly important' to the effectiveness of the workings of the public sector (Department of Justice Canada, 2001). In Sweden, debate about the costs and benefits of community engagement and the call for research into good practice examples has intensified since 2006 (Solli, Demediuk, & Sims, 2005).

Community-centred governance assists in tackling current and future challenges to public management by combining the strengths of citizens, representatives and practitioners (Box, 1998). So the community can and must play an important role in decisions about public policy and the actions required to achieve objectives, and this requires governments to facilitate engagement and find new ways of listening to the voice of people (Bingham, Nabachi, & O'Leary, 2005).

With community engagement initiatives to increase participation in decision making, we are witnessing a shift away from reliance on public officials and administrators to frame objectives and action (Roberts, 2004). Citizens should be at the centre of the governing processes and have an authentic role (Box, 1998; King & Stivers, 1998). In this public management paradigm, administrators should help to create the conditions for well informed citizen participation (Box, 1998), and as front-line operators they can collaborate with citizens in deliberations about the nature and implementation of government work (King & Stivers, 1998).

Whilst many decisions that were once made out of sight of the public are now subject to involvement of individual citizens or community groups, there is a gap in the knowledge about what works, what does not work and why, so closer study of practice is required to inform future policy and action (Box, 1998; Fung, 2006; Thomas, 1995; Wang, 2001; Yang, 2005). Indeed, while community engagement is widely advocated as a way of improving the work of local government, its affect in practice on decision making is poorly understood (Audit Commission,

2003; Department of Justice Canada, 2001). Public sector managers and officials face challenges in being expected to operate with increasing public participation. They are not instructed about, and do not know, exactly how and when the participation should happen, only that it should be done without sacrificing efficiency or effectiveness (Thomas, 1995).

So knowledge of what works in particular contexts is vital since citizen involvement can potentially produce better decisions with efficiency and effectiveness benefits flowing to society, whereas poorly executed citizen participation can be dysfunctional to the political and administrative systems (Thomas, 1995). Further research should assist managers and officials in these challenges by providing better information to decrease risks in designing and operationalizing community engagement initiatives.

Methodology

The case study in this submission is a small contribution towards the need for research that examines the actual forms of participation and impacts on policy or implementation (Cooper, Bryer, & Meek, 2006; Fung, 2006; Roberts, 2004). Guy Peters (2000) argues that by interviewing individuals in an organization about their work and context, one can get a valuable microscopic analysis. With this microscopic lens, one is not attempting to get neat statistical and generalisable findings, but to see the gritty reality these individuals face (Silverman, 2000). Case studies of practice make issues discussable - for "... what cannot be discussed cannot be improved, at least not intentionally" (Jonsson, 1996, p. vii). In such exploratory studies, qualitative methodologies are appropriate as they are structured around discovering themes and variations which can improve our understanding of a phenomena and inform future research (Miles & Huberman, 1994).

This research reports on how managers and politicians in one Swedish kommun use community engagement initiatives to increase the interest and influence of citizens in the work of government. This kommun was recommended to the researcher by the Swedish Association of Local Authorities and Regions as a site for a useful case study, since a general reputation for good practice was not matched published detail about how the system worked. At this Kommun the CEO and Deputy-mayor were interviewed as the political and management officials with direct responsibility and knowledge about the operations of the community engagement program. The extensive semi-structured interviews were augmented by site visits within the municipality to visit projects and programs. This council is anonymised for the purposes of this paper as Sigma Kommun.

Whilst this paper has a clear limitation of not providing representative information about Swedish practice in that it examines a single Kommun with a

particular context, the issues that arise can inform debate about good practice and alternative responses in the Western Australian and broader Australian context.

The questions posed in the interviews revolved around three key issues arising from Fung's (2006) research. Firstly, the scope of participation is a dimension concerned with who participates. Secondly, the mode of communication and decision considers the level at which parties communicate and make decisions together, and mechanisms for that communication. Thirdly, the extent of authority gauges how discussions connect with policy and action, the extent to which the things participants say is linked with what the public administrators actually do (Fung, 2006).

Community Engagement at Sigma Kommun

Unlike countries like the United Kingdom and Australia where legislation requires local governments to incorporate community engagement activities into their processes, Swedish local governments engage or otherwise on a self-determined basis (Solli et al., 2005). In economic and social terms, the work of Swedish kommuns is hugely influential as it includes basic services that councils around the world typically offer, plus responsibility for education and health care.

In terms of background, Sigma Kommun has about 40,000 inhabitants and 2,200 employees. Sigma comprises of two main areas: twenty percent of the population live in the affluent historic area of Sigma Stad; and seventy percent reside in the town of Merta which represents a less prosperous and more varied new society with a high immigrant population. So Sigma has a very mixed cohort of inhabitants from different economic, cultural and educational backgrounds and this impacts on how and why engagement is practiced within the Kommun, not least of all because inhabitants in the lower socio-economic parts of Merta have less belief that they can or should influence the work of government, and less knowledge of how to go about it.

The main pressures for community engagement have come locally and not from directives of the central government, but are tied up with a national phenomena. In Sigma, voting participation in local government elections fell from 90% in 1993 to 83% in 1994, and then to 74% in 2002. Whilst 74 % is by European standards a rather high level, it was a worrying trend for Sweden. By 2000 the declining participation in the democratic process triggered discussion in Sigma municipal council about how to make the governance of the Kommun a more attractive thing for people to be interested in and active about.

From 2000 to 2004 the Kommun conducted community engagement initiatives typical in local governments across Sweden like opening-up committee meetings to public scrutiny, expanding the number and representativeness of boards, and carrying out capacity building projects in less-privileged areas. In 2004 the

politicians decided that these engagement measures were not enough and a more bold experiment - dubbed the 'Rodslag' project - should be tried. As the CEO explains, "There is not a good English translation for this term but we can try to use 'deliberative referendum' to describe this project". Rodslag rose from the political level at council as a response to continuing signals from many residents of a lessening involvement in the political process. Rodslag was conceived as a way to reverse this trend and involve citizens in council decision making. Sigma Kommun contracted a company that had been involved in some forms of deliberative referendums elsewhere in Sweden to provide some expertise in important processes such as two-way communication of information. Sigma chose to start its Rodslag project in quite a big way with eight deliberative referendums in 2005 and two in 2006.

Rodslag does not present a blank canvas for comment or allow for the generation of a 'wish list' by the community. Instead, the Rodslag project asks citizens from different groups, backgrounds or interests to choose between highly specified alternatives. The questions asked in each referendum require a very simple yes or no answer. For example: should this road be opened or closed?; should this building be 12 floors or 4?; should the school be structured to include pre-school children or not? The politicians of the Kommun have committed to follow the community's decision in the referendum. The commitment stands no matter the size of the voter turn-out or the margin between the alternatives. The Deputy Mayor notes that the council "... has not had to face an issue of what to do if say only 10% turned out to vote, as the referendum with the least participation was 29% and most 64% ... and we were very satisfied with the attention".

The minimum age limit for Rodslag voting is set at 16, and that is 2 years before normal election voting. The Kommun decides who is eligible to vote in a particular matter, and those people are contacted by mail and electronically. Each prospective voter receives an envelope in the mail that contains information brochures on the context of that Rodslag and the choice of options, paper voting forms with a return stamped envelope, and instructions about how to vote using an individual internet code supplied. So voting allows the option of making a traditional choice via printed ballot paper and return letter or using a secure electronic submission. Where earlier Rodslags ended up with a 60/40 paper to internet voting ratio, later referendums are moving towards 40/60 in favour of the electronic medium.

A lot of 'front end' informational campaigns were connected to each deliberate referendum using different kinds of media activities. Sigma used fairly typical community meeting forums favoured by many councils in Sweden and abroad, with politicians and officials making presentations and taking questions and comments from the public. Also for the first time, internet chats with the inhabitants were used to discuss referendum issues, and the CEO believes "... it

was popular, interesting and useful”. These internet chats were real-time sessions that ran according to advertised times. In addition, innovative ways of describing the decision alternatives were used. For example, to indicate the two decision options for the height of a proposed building, large balloons were tethered aloft on the proposed site to provide visual reference points for decision making, and to also stoke interest in the issue and the upcoming vote. Another innovative example concerns major changes proposed for an important road that had become a quite dangerous ‘speedway’. There were 10,000 people living along or near this road and it has become a significant problem. The two alternatives available for voting were represented in two huge cakes (replete with edible depictions of road surfaces, intersection roundabouts, lights and trees) and these were displayed on-site in large tents and then consumed after inspection by community members. As an aside, the Deputy Mayor was unsure whether proponents of one solution ate the cake representing that option or consumed the ‘opposition’ cake to make that visually disappear.

To use the Rodslag methodology, the council looked for suitable questions for referendums to solve. Some of these questions had been on the agenda for a while and some were emerging issues. One matter about whether a particular street should be opened and closed was over forty years old. So the referendums proved a good way of a good way of getting rid of some old and new questions. Each referendum is not for everyone in the municipality and there is a discussion and a political decision as to what part of the population should be included in a referendum. The number of potential voters specified by the Kommun as eligible to vote on a particular Rodslag depends on the nature of the issue, and how it relates the structure of the community. The smallest Rodslag engaged 2,000 inhabitants, and the largest took in 12,000 people. 12,000 people is almost the entire post-16 years old voting population, and that vote centered on where to put a new aged care facility.

The two voting choices available to voters formed the decision boundaries that the Kommun considered to be two reasonable and workable options which satisfied economic, legal, social, environmental and other base criteria. As the CEO commented, “... the two alternatives were not one bad and one good, but two quite different but reasonable alternatives”. In the Rodslags where the alternative options seemed to be more different, residents tended to form groups to publicise one view or another and engaged in a lot of robust promotional activities.

The preferences of politicians and managers can collide with the choice made by the referendum voters. In the balloon-based Rodslag noted earlier, the CEO commented “We had to change balloons because someone often cut the wire ... and there were a lot of balloons (used). It is an example of how we worked with simple means to describe what we were doing. Under the line and balloon there were descriptions of what this is about – we hoped people see the balloon and get

interested and they did". Politicians and administrators were keen to have a tall building in this area, and hoped that the high balloon would carry the day. It did not, and the community selected the low-rise option. However, according to the Deputy Mayor, the loss of the preferred model was not a setback because the Kommun didn't try to convince people one way or the other and just stated some facts like "This option will look like this with x floors, rooms and occupants". On the question as to whether the fact that the Kommun put the high balloon up to be compared to a lower balloon actually made it harder for council's agenda to win, the CEO responded that at least the balloons seemed " ... to achieve our main objective of getting more interest". With the Rodslag that featured the competing road designs that described on two different cakes, people voted a clear 61% in choosing the alternative with trees at the side – the 'alley' plan. In terms of that outcome, the CEO responds with a similar theme to the balloons case: "the important conclusion in this case was not the alternative chosen but that we asked and people participated, and there was much approval and people wish to do more (Rodslags) in the future ... the input (of people) is more important than the result".

In the Rodslags, an interesting issue was how the supporters of the losing option responded to an adverse outcome. The CEO noted that " ... the evaluation of how people felt found a usual reaction that even if I did not have my vote win the result, it was good to take part". Only in one case, that of the 40 year old closure issue, was dissent with the verdict a problem. As the Deputy Mayor explained, "The few that voted against can't take the result, and there are legal matters they can and do use to continue that issue – but that is the only one".

Also in terms of outcomes, one main feature of these Rodslag projects is, according to the CEO, " ... that it is important for participants to see the results of their vote very quickly". In the competing roads case, trees etc were ordered immediately and work undertaken speedily. The result of the vote is described in the local newspaper and the internet home site as soon as possible. Quick publication of the result and rapid action is felt by the interviewees to be an incentive for participation by inhabitants in future community engagement activities.

In terms of financial costs the ten Rodslags were an ambitious project. They cost at least 2.5 million kroner in direct costs, and consumed a very significant but uncalculated cost in time and other resources expended by politicians, management and employees. Each of the ten Rodslags varied in cost due to their scope, but there was a learning cost on the council's behalf that got less as experience with the processes grew. This experience meant that as time went on, Rodslags became easier and easier to operate – both for the Kommun and for the community. The CEO argues that the cost of running a Rodslag was "Not all an expense as it built up social capital and learning - but that's hard to describe and (we) have to report it as an expense". A key cost component was consulting fees,

as they had to buy-in expertise in processes, especially on secure internet voting technology and the professional evaluation of results. Putting the materials together and mailing was a significant expense, and the Deputy Mayor notes that “Swedish post had done well.”

Interviewees stressed that the Kommun, through their experiences and evaluations of the Rodslag project so far, have found a positive cost-benefit mix. So much so that it is in the political plan for Sigma Kommun to keep using these referendums, which in the future will be the responsibility of the new Democracy Committee made up of elected representatives. The decision to continue with this innovation was influenced by very positive results gleaned from a survey of community experiences and reactions. The Kommun ran a telephone survey 1,000 inhabitants asking how they feel about Rodslags. This was a statistically representative sample of the whole population, and not just people who opted to take part in Rodslag voting. Over 80% said the deliberative democracy project was good or very good and hoped there would be further opportunities to take part. But the ‘acid-test’ is, according to the CEO, is the degree to which engagement in-between the election cycle drove voting on the subsequent election day. In the September 2006 election, voter participation increased 3.4 percent in the municipality overall, and 7.4 percent in one of the less affluent areas. The Deputy Major contends that this result “... must be some sort of world’s record or European one at least .. and the increase (is) in a context of a trend going down.....Hopefully a trend breaker”. But some small sections of the community have not interacted in Rodslags, and for these the CEO comments that the Kommun “... doesn’t have the ‘door openers’ so to say”, and is searching for new ways to connect those citizens with future initiatives.

A key issue for the future is to determine how much of the work of council could be put out as deliberative referendums. Whilst the Kommun has a policy of continuing with this initiative, the CEO believes that it “... can’t put too much out in an organised way and (we) need to choose appropriate subjects”. Whilst the majority of politicians and managers support the current form and extent of engagement activities, there are a number of constraints that could work against future expansion of schemes to devolve decision making to the community. Two of the practical constraints that limit the number of Rodslags are the danger of voter fatigue and resourcing costs and managerial issues. Rodslags have extended the work of managers since the views of multiple stakeholders are to be considered before the decision boundaries are fashioned, and then these boundaries must be articulated and communicated in the way that is accessible to the community, given variations in their abode, literacy, numeracy and access to technology. In addition, work is required in the interactive Internet chats and other meeting methods. So the consultation and participation processes consume much time and other scarce resources of the managers. Interestingly, although the preferred choice of professional managers does not always succeed - for example the community over-rode management’s preference for the taller option for the

new building in the town centre and said no to the proposed siting of the new home for elderly in central spot in a major recreation area - this is not seen as a cost by management. But whilst managers are supportive of current levels of engagement initiatives and devolvment of decision making, their support for expansion is an open question.

The majority of politicians have voted for the current levels and forms of engagement and have committed to use Rodslags in the future. Indeed, the CEO and Deputy Mayor note that some politicians who initially doubtful have become stronger advocates of the community participation in council decision making. As the Deputy Mayor notes, a major issue in implementing engagement initiatives revolves around balancing the traditional role of politicians to set policy and approve the activities recommended by managers, with a scenario wher e decisions are being made or influenced through engagement initiatives: “ ... 1000’s vote for you and expect you to do a job ... they give you a mandate and you become representatives for a lot of people (but) ... being a good representative can be to ask them in other ways like referendums and that is a good thing”. Also, the views and reaction of politicians to engagement is somewhat moderated by allegiances to political parties and party policies, since by law politicians must come from political parties as opposed to being independents. These allegiances have caused tensions for, and between, elected representatives and party bureaucrats.

The scope of issues that can be addressed through Rodslags may be limited to solving a particular issue, rather than for wider resource allocation matters. The Deputy Mayor agues that “ ... most (people) are interested in one or two questions but the politicians elected have to take an overall perspective, we can’t give all the money to schools – we have to give some to the elderly; and we can’t give all the money to football arenas, need roads as well. Well that is politics, and you can ask the people and they can say this is more important than that, but you can’t have a municipality without roads and aged care”. So while in theory the next step in community engagement could extend to resource allocation decisions say through participative budgeting made famous by the Porta Allegro in Brazil, and in theory it could be operationalised, the Deputy Mayor believes that that type of decision does not look so likely at this point in time “ ... but never say never”. She also notes that participative budgets are about short-term (one year or one election cycle) thinking, and would need to be balanced with a longer term view.

Conclusions and further research

In terms of Fung’s (2006) key questions, we firstly have seen that the scope of participation has been carefully limited to particular interest groups – at least in terms of the ability to vote in a Rodslag. Secondly, the mode of communication is a sophisticated combination of conventional practices like forums along with innovative practices like real-time electronic discussions and illustrative models set up in the field that both engage interest and help conceptualise the voting

options that are constructed from what the Kommun believes to be viable alternatives. The construction of these alternatives has also been the subject of information from engagement initiatives – for example where paintings done by students to show what they wanted their school to look like were exhibited and formed part of the decision-making process about the competing viable alternatives proposed by the Kommun for voting. Thirdly, the extent of authority saw a two-stage process in connecting what community participants want to government policy and action, with politicians and managers constructing decision alternatives using engagement activities, and then eligible voters having the final say through voting.

Otley (1999) argues that decision making in an organisation can be seen in terms of what happens with objectives, activities, target setting, accountabilities, and organisational learning. In Sigma Kommun, the key objectives that are central to overall future success and the way that they are to be measured is determined by the politicians. The strategies and plans adopted to achieve the key objectives, and the activities are necessary for plans to deliver expected results are proposed by management and sanctioned either directly by politicians or by the community in Rodslags. Management controls issues of how to assess and measure the performance of these activities. Management also proposes the performance standards that are required to achieve success with key objectives and activities. Accountabilities for success or failure sit with politicians and managers, for even where the community makes the final decision in a Rodslag, these are based on alternatives attested as good and viable by the officials. Rodslags have been a resource intensive but successful means of promoting information flows and learning for most groups within the community. Whilst there has been devolution of decision making to the Sigma community in a way that is unprecedented in Swedish local government, the scope has been limited to a choice of the two alternative actions that the Kommun sets as the boundaries. Therefore the decision making afforded to the community in Sigma is thus rather limited in scope compared to the possibilities offered by Otley's model.

Future research could investigate the variables that affect the ability of Sigma or other governments to expand decision making by communities beyond these current boundaries into other areas flagged by Otley, and how these related to the Western Australian context. For the officials at Sigma, a priority is research to examine how and why the current initiatives have failed to connect with some marginalised groups and individuals. For now, managers and politicians are satisfied with the cost-benefit balance of current engagement initiatives, but future research could usefully examine concerns about over-turning traditional roles of stakeholders, and whether solutions exist for potential voter-fatigue.

References

- Audit Commission. (2003). User Focus and Citizen Engagement. Learning from comprehensive performance assessment: briefing 4. United Kingdom: Audit Commission.
- Bingham, L. B., Nabachi, T., & O'Leary, R. (2005). The New Governance: Practices and Processes for Stakeholder and Citizen Participation in the Work of Government. *Public Administration Review*, 65(5), 547-558.
- Box, R. C. (1998). *Citizen Governance: Leading American Communities into the 21st Century*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Cooper, T. L., Bryer, T. A., & Meek, J. W. (2006). Citizen-Centered Collaborative Public Management. *Public Administration Review*(Specila Issue), 76-88.
- Department of Justice Canada. (2001). Evaluation and citizen engagement. Retrieved 5/12/06, from http://www.justice.gc.ca/en/ps/eval/reports/01/citizen_engagement/ce.html.
- Fung, A. (2006). Varieties of Participation in Complex Government. *Public Administration Review*(Special Issue), 66-75.
- Jonsson, S. (1996). *Accounting for improvement*. Oxford: Permagon.
- King, C., & Stivers, C. (1998). *Government Is Us: Public Administration in an Anti-Government Era*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Miles, M. B., & Huberman, M. A. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Otley, D. (1999). Performance management: a framework for management control systems research. *Management Accounting Research*, 10, 363-382.
- Peters, G. (2000). Introduction. In R. Solli, R. Sims & P. Demediuk (Eds.), *Chief Financial Officers in local government– Sweden Vs Australia: Goteborg University Report*.
- Roberts, N. (2004). Public Deliberation in an Age of Direct Citizen Participation. *American Review of Public Administration*, 34(4), 315-353.
- Silverman, D. (2000). *Doing qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks: Sage.
- Solli, R., Demediuk, P., & Sims, R. (2005). The namesake: On best value and other reformmarks. In B. Czarniawska & G. Sevon (Eds.), *Global Ideas*. Copenhagen.: Liber – Copenhagen Business School Press.
- State Government of Victoria. (2005). *A Vision for Victoria to 2010 and Beyond: State Government of Victoria*.
- Thomas, J. C. (1995). *Public Participation in Public Decisions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Wang, X. (2001). Assessing public participation in U.S. cities. *Public Performance and Management Review*, 24(4), 322-336.
- Yang, K. (2005). Public Administrator's Trust in Citizens: a Missing Link in Involvement Efforts. *Public Administration Review*, 65(3), 273-285.