

BUILDING COMMUNITIES : SA Strategic Plan Review

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Abstract:

The Review of the Building Communities Objectives and Targets under the State Strategic Plan raises opportunities to revisit and consider how these are working and what else needs to happen. There are emergent challenges to communities and civic engagement in an era of 'competitive individualism' and in contexts of isolation, disenfranchisement and disengagement. The following address seeks to highlight some of the issues underpinning the success of existing targets, and poses questions around new directions for future activities and outcomes.

Thanks for the opportunity to speak in this session to consider communities' targets for action under the SA Strategic Plan.

The good work already done on the plan has set a number of targets around increasing women's participation in leadership and political roles, increasing effective voter participation at state and local government levels, increasing volunteering in the community, aligning state and local government plans and building the sustainability of regional communities.

Today's work is to revisit the Strategic Plan, and to consider what has been done, what needs to be done and what we need to think about differently.

As part of that consideration we need to acknowledge the utility of targets in informing and focusing government activity, but ask the question whether meeting a target necessarily achieves improvements in the lives of those who are most marginalised and disadvantaged.

This important question is raised in a paper by the Director of the Office for Women, Sandy Pitcher, who points out that the social improvement targets set by the UK government were being met but at the same time making no change or further marginalising the most vulnerable racial minority groups. Her argument is for targets to be matched with equity outcomes. Here in South Australia it is important to take those lessons on board.

The Premier's Advisory Council for Women has also made the case to include the objective of 'achieving equality' as being at least as important as 'expanding opportunity.' When opportunities are mainly distributed to the most able at the expense of the most marginal we may inadvertently further entrench social inequality and exclusion. Racial and gender equality needs to be written into accountability mechanisms, measuring not only average improvements embedded in targets, but also changes to outcomes for the most disadvantaged and marginalised social groups.

As a single mother myself, who has lived on a low income while raising my children, I am keenly aware that there are many in my community who have not been able to access the education and employment which has enabled me to remain housed, pay the bills and undertake voluntary activity in the wider community. If we want to enable more individuals to contribute more widely in their communities we have to find ways to ensure that all individuals and families have reasonable access to basic needs, as well as opportunities to become engaged with wider issues.

I come to today's forum as a member of many communities and would characterise myself as a community worker both through my formal employment as an academic in the School of Education at the University of South Australia, but also in my voluntary involvements with the National Council of Single Mothers and their Children and with the Australian Council of Social Services.

I also identify with the community of Port Adelaide and the north-western suburbs – the places and people where my family use public transport, go to the doctor, attend community events, go to school, do the shopping and play sport, constitute my community. When we talk about building communities there are questions around what it is that we are building, who is it being built for and whose interests will be served?

My experience in the community sector has built a strong awareness that the most productive outcomes are usually founded in collective action around clearly agreed goals which are owned by the people whose lives are directly connected to the issues, in contrast to notions which have been externally generated and brought in for adoption.

Which brings me to the activities which will be undertaken here today.

The targets in the State Strategic Plan have reflected the work of previous planners and these have flowed through to state departments to orient their policy and practice. However our task today is not to simply confirm what is already there but to make the most of this opportunity to re-visit what has been done and to consider the challenges and opportunities embedded in the concept of 'building communities'. What equity outcomes should be embedded in the targets?

Presently the notion of building civic life is constituted in targets to improve women's leadership, volunteer activity, voter turnouts and aligning the interface between state and local governments, as well as ensuring the sustainability of regional communities through building and maintaining populations, reducing regional unemployment and crime rates and ensuring that needed infrastructure is developed and maintained to sustain social and economic life. But behind these objectives and their accompanying targets lie complex social processes.

For example, women's availability for leadership and political and volunteering roles draws attention to the 'emptying' suburbs where women are increasingly caught up

in paid work in the day and unpaid family work at night, leaving little time for volunteer or civic activity. As primary carers many women are experiencing the generation squeeze between tending their children and their aging parents' needs. What community infrastructure is significant to ensure that the work intensification of market and family work leaves time, opportunity and inclination for women to do more than collapse in an exhausted heap?

What kinds of housing and what kinds of housing access and tenure do we need to ensure that communities are diverse and inclusive? Low income families and individuals can experience exclusion from communities because they can't afford to live there. People from diverse language groups can experience exclusion from community when their needs are not recognised or addressed. If we want a community with robust volunteering and civic engagement it makes sense to think about whether the local services, housing mix and regional planning are conducive to diversity and inclusion.

When we consider the issue of voter turnout at state and local government levels, again the question for me rests with the social processes underpinning people's awareness of their voting rights and their recognition of its value. In my community, which has many residents from a low socio-economic background, many with English as second language and with most young people leaving school before year 12, there is a challenge in informing and empowering people to believe that their vote will make a difference. How do local governments inform young people about their activities? How do new arrivals make sense of their civic responsibilities? Why does political involvement matter at least as much as much as football or Bec and Lleyton's baby?

In regional areas, the loss of services, restricted access to education and employment opportunities is raising questions about the viability of some townships. The targets in the current plan therefore seek to arrest the slow decline of regional communities through developing new industry opportunities and new ways of doing business and delivering services which will enable people to earn a living and raise their families without sacrificing access to employment, education, amenities and services.

The target to reduce crime in regional areas by 10 percent in 10 years for example, raises questions about the types of crime reduction methods, crimes and criminals to be targeted. If reducing crime relies on putting more Indigenous people in prison for example, we are arguably at risk of achieving the target but at the expense of increased inequality and marginalisation for marginalised people. Rather, if crime reduction efforts are organised around increased opportunities for education and employment of those most at risk of criminalisation, the outcome is likely to achieve both equity and crime reduction targets. Once again this implies a need for community engagement which seeks to be inclusive, rather than narrowly focused on outcomes.

There is of course more to building communities than has been captured in the current targets and today's proceedings can hopefully stimulate your thinking around what more can be done to ensure that the notion of 'community' survives in any real and meaningful way in the face of social change which privileges and encourages competitive individualism. We hear in the media of instances where people have died and no-one has discovered them for many months; neighbourhoods where families live side by side and don't know, or want to know, each other's names; places where the streetscape is about competition for the biggest McMansion. My idea or ideal of community is one where people are able to recognise and assist one another, share goals and values and work and play with confidence in their place as a member of the community.

So how might we get there? Rather than answers I propose to raise a few more questions. In posing these I am hoping to stimulate creative pathways for you to engage with concepts linked to the building blocks of community.

One of the elements of a sense of community is durability of time and place. How do we go about ensuring that the idea of living in a community survives in places where gentrification is forcing out long-term residents in favour of new developments?

How does planning and provision of public transport and health, education and family services intersect with notions of community? What are the roles of services in building and sustaining social capital - particularly in communities with high levels of social challenges?

What infrastructure is needed to ensure that community members with special needs are not excluded from civic engagement? Do building design, recreation parks and pathways have anything to do with building a sense of community membership and participation? What transport services are needed for regional populations to have opportunities to participate in their community.

What happens when key employers leave communities? How can state and local governments work together to minimise the loss of community when there are rapid rises in local unemployment, forced employment migration? What partnerships can be formed to address crises in rural and regional production arising from failure of markets, or weather or natural disasters? What kinds of opportunities do people living in regional areas need to sustain their way of life?

What role can state and local governments play in engaging with marginalised and disaffected groups to build a sense of community? What is needed? Is it just about information and education? Is it about consultation and opportunities for input? Is it about services or facilities that address specific needs?

Is the 'digital divide' significant to building communities? Does the computer and internet revolution change the kinds of communities we can engage in by expanding to encompass new virtual resources and boundaries? Or does it mean the creation of

a newly disenfranchised community? How do services such as libraries and neighbourhood centres impact on opportunities for community members to expand their community networks?

Engagement with young people is a particular issue as it is they who will be the voting citizens of the coming decades. Current formal responses to young people tend to be polarised between the enabled, informed and educated elites who are able to participate and those who are culturally and often geographically excluded and targeted under 'deficit' categories'.

There is a desperate need to seek ways of inclusive affirmation which has a place for everybody and a point of relevance and connection across the community.

For my children and many other young people, politics is just 'boring' and seen to be worse than forcing them to watch the ABC News. It is not seen as connected to whether they can catch a bus, ride a skateboard or hang out at the local shopping centre after school, yet local government decisions will in fact have shaped many of their options. Cracking the relevance code is unlikely to be easy, but it is certain to be worthwhile if community members come to see civic engagement as a way to get their needs met.

So in conclusion, I hope that I have unpacked some of the wrapping paper around the neat notion of building communities and fossicked through some of the elements underpinning notions of community, particularly as it relates to social change. The social challenges of 'emptying suburbs', gentrification, poverty and unemployment, the digital divide, rural population loss, and civic disengagement are significant obstacles to building communities but they also raise opportunities to find new ways to sustain a sense of community. We need to find ways of embedding gender and cultural equity measures within the identified targets so that those at the back of the queue are not destined to be stuck there.

I have raised these questions in the spirit of inquiry and hope that your collected wisdom and experience can generate exciting pathways forward which can take the SA Strategic Plan around Building Communities into a new phase of engagement, equity and opportunity.