Engaging rural communities to produce a sustainable decision

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Desley's job is to build the capacity and readiness of the organisation to engage its communities as an integral part of the decision-making process.

In her spare time she is the President of the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2). In 2005 when working at the Local Government Association of Queensland her work was honoured with the IAP2 Asia Pacific award for best policy framework.

Yes, go the Pies, and I have only been in Melbourne 18 months. Indoctrinated already. I'd like to pay my respects to the indigenous owners on whose land we stand today, and also to all of you and the conference organisers. It's a really great feel here at this conference. A lot of passionate people. People who really care about what they do, and in the conversations that I've been hearing, really want to do it a whole lot better; citizen engagement, public participation, community engagement, being a bit of a theme there. And I use all of those terms because, depending on where you live in the world, you might refer to one or the other. We do tend, in Australia, to refer to the term "community engagement" and that's what I'm going to stick with today.

Now, I have a confession, I'm not the president of IAP2. I was, until the end of the year. I certainly was, when Gordon approached me, to do this conference. I do have a long history with the organisation, as you can see, and still have a seat on the International Board, but the president now is a Canadian, Jeff Wilson, from Nova Scotia.

So who are we? Who is IAP2? We describe ourselves as the industry body for this work of community engagement. We have membership in 32 countries; Australasia, Australia/New Zealand being the largest, in fact. The membership in our country has grown by 700 per cent in the last few years; a testimony to the need for this type of work and for people wanting some guidance around it. It's almost as if we understand now that we need to do this work; it's important, and people are coming and looking for how to do it and how to do it well.

It think it's always worth just debunking a few myths around what it is. It's not just a wickey and it's not just a conversation or a public meeting; they are tools of engagement. And whenever I work with people to design process around this, I actually say, "Park that, like, let's hang onto that. We will get to the technique or the tool, once we go through a thoughtful process about what it is we really want to do, and why and who with." So if you hear the word "process" from me several times today, don't be surprised. It is a process. It's something that we do, that involves people in problem solving or decision making - and I will come back to that point about decision making throughout the presentation - to make use of that public knowledge, wisdom, input, to help make the decision.

It's probably also worth talking about "What is community?" just quickly, and my answer to that would be, well, it depends; it depends upon the issue or the problem or the opportunity on the table. I like the term "community of interest" and I will often ask people, "Who is your community of interest on this problem or this opportunity you have?" In my job, in the City of Melbourne, very often the community of interest will be entirely internal to the organisation; it won't have any impact on them folk out there. That's often a surprise for people, because they do think of community engagement as talking to them folk out there, rather than having the conversation between ourselves and here, or indeed, with other levels of government, other stakeholders, sometimes people refer to them. So I think it's always an important part of the process, to think about who is the community; who is going to be impacted by this decision, this opportunity?

So why do we do it? Gosh, there's a whole lot of reasons. Sadly, it's too often done to tick a box, and I have heard that throughout the presentations yesterday - the word "tokenistic" came up a lot. We do it because we think we have to. There certainly is a feeling by some decision makers that it's going to be hard, it's going to be difficult, it's one more thing we have to do, but I'm wanting you to think differently about community engagement and why we undertake it. It certainly provides us with an opportunity to build a bigger window of knowledge.

The people that we are talking to or engaging with, know stuff. They know stuff about things with their own health, their own communities, particularly their families, their networks. They have ideas about how they would like to see things. People very often complain in these engagement processes that they are the "done to" ; somebody else is making the decision for them, and it often results in a program, a policy, a service; it doesn't quite hit the mark for people, and is probably a waste of time and money sometimes.

So we do want to bridge the gap between people and the services that we provide and the policies that we deliver, and it is - and I feel very passionate about this - a pillar of good democracy. Now, we talk a lot about accountability in our organisations, and transparency, community engagement or bringing people who matter, who are impacted by the things we do, into the equation; it could be a really good conversation around how that fits within a democratic framework. We haven't got time to go there today, but it is a wonderful conversation.

I'm going to quickly step you through a couple of the foundations of a meaningful community engagement process, things that hopefully you can take away as a bit of a checklist for yourself around this work, and I will point out some specific things that I think will be very helpful in dealing with remote and rural communities. Before I moved to Melbourne, 18 months ago, I worked in Queensland for the Local Government Association of Queensland, as their social policy adviser, so I had 167 councils that I was engaging with and working with, to undertake that, you know, as part of their core business, from the Torres Strait to rural communities, and really saw some wonderful things happening, and some diabolical things happening. So hopefully, we can avoid some of the traps, by sticking to some principles around this work.

The first one, from an IAP2 perspective - so these are conversations that occur globally about what is important - is that community engagement is values based. We would spend a lot of time thinking, checking in, before we go anywhere near the engagement itself, about what's going on in place, what's going on in the community that we want to talk to, the community of interest? What do people care about? What's important to them? What's hitting their buttons? Where are they coming from? What's important to us is the sponsor or the decision maker. How do you people view us in this scenario or situation? Do people trust us? Absolute folly for an organisation that isn't trusted to go out and start talking about transparency and openness, when you would need to do some work, some pre-work first.

The process values I am going to unpack with you - because how we do this work is of utmost importance. People can smell a rat a mile away, you know, and the integrity of the process is everything in this work. I have seen it happen time and time again, where people can live with an outcome that isn't quite what they really wanted, but if they feel like they have been approached fairly, honestly, the process has been sincere, then they are much happier to live with the outcome. You will often hear people complaining about the way this was done. "You came and you asked for our opinion and then you went and you did what you wanted to, anyway," or "You came and asked for our opinion, and then you never got back to us and told us what happened." So the process values of how you do this, is how I would measure myself.

So in checking in with community values, knowing your community is a vital first step. So what is going on for people? Doing some of that pre-work, that homework, what's the history in this place? What's the history of engagement in this place? How do people react? How do people gather? How do people communicate? Where is the strength in this community? What does my organisation stand for? Now, we actually have all these lovely, sort of, checklist questions for people to think about and brew on, before we go into these - developing what we call a community engagement plan, and we follow a very logical process with this work. It's just extraordinary how many times we do this thing called community engagement without having any kind of plan around it. We sort of blunder in a little bit, you know, blind at times, and it's not surprising that things fall over or get tripped up.

We really want to have good conversations with people, so the values work is absolutely essential. I'm just going to give you an example of the, you know, a conversation that isn't values based. Everyone is familiar with the town of Toowoomba? The international guests might not be. Toowoomba has just had some terrible disasters, as we know, but they've got an interesting history around this work. Some years ago there was a conversation in the community about recycled water. Toowoomba were in drought and had been for eight years, and it's a green town, beautiful parks. They have a flower festival. All of these things were under threat in their community and it actually polarised the community on the issue of recycled water, because some people wanted it and others didn't; they were very opposed to the recycle plant, because it was going to be using some effluent water. You might have heard the slogans where Toowoomba was being called "Poowoomba" and all that kind of thing; it was diabolical.

The conversation in that community was very much at that position (a), position (b) level, "Do you want recycled water? Yes or no?" and in fact, it went to a plebiscite in the community, and it was, like, 51/49 vote; the promise from the federal government, being a large amount of money, if they could demonstrate community support for the issue. The whole thing fell over completely. But what was everybody in that community caring about? Everybody cared about their town. Everybody cared about having a reliable source of water for their gardens and their homes. Everybody cared about their property values. The conversation in that community shifted, big time, and it went through a process of really looking at what people in that community collectively valued; that sort of space where the two triangles cross over, if you like, is where the quality conversation could occur, and did occur, in fact.

It was a very happy outcome for that community where they have a vision - a process that went through a planning to 20/50 for them, and included recycled water and a whole lot of other things, to address the issues. I am wanting to plant a seed about the type of conversation that we could have with people and for it being a meaningful conversation around shared values of things that we have in common, as a starting place, particularly important where there is conflict in communities.

The process values that I referred to - there are seven of them - are the sort of things that a robust community engagement process should be able to tick off on. So, yes, it's probably likely that everyone in this room agrees that the public should have a say in decisions about actions that affect their lives. It doesn't happen a whole lot, but most of you would agree with that. Certainly, when something is going to affect me, I want to have something, you know, a say or some involvement in it. The public participation includes the promise that the public's contribution will influence the decision. So we have come and asked for your opinion. We're going to do something with that. We're actually going to incorporate that into the decision. And if we're not, and if we don't intend to, then we shouldn't be doing it. The honesty in the process, the integrity of the process being, remember, the utmost importance. If we don't want to hear what people are going to say and if we're not prepared to listen and incorporate it, then we really need to check in about why we're doing it, in the first place.

It promotes sustainable decisions by recognising and communicating the needs and interests of everybody in the process, including the decision maker. So the decision maker has a right as well, in here. When I worked with my organisation, it's really important to me that the engagement work that we do is going to further the organisation's objectives; are they well thought through objectives and plans, and the purpose of the engagement is to further those, most of the time. I think this is the particularly important one for working in remote and rural communities, that we will seek out and facilitate the involvement of those potentially affected.

There will always be a group of people who live in that, sort of, top of the iceberg where they will come to you; people who are organised; generally articulate; have thought through issues; they might belong to a peak body or a group, and they will be at the table; they will bring themselves to the table, but they often represent just a very small number of the people who will be affected. A good process would actually go and find those people, know who they are, identify who they are and seek them out.

This is a really important one, too, that we would actually seek input from people in designing how they participate. And when I say things like that, I can hear some people going, "Oh, my God," you know, "you mean you want to engage on the engagement?" and - yes, sometimes we do need to do that. So what is going to work for people? How would people like to participate? What is going to make it easy for them? Is technology going to be the answer for people living in those rural communities? Do they want face-to-face? Do

they want to gather in small groups? What's the method - and there may not be just one - most good quality processes have several things happening at once, several techniques or tools to do the engagement.

We will provide information for people to participate in a meaningful way, and it wouldn't be unusual for me to hear people say, "What's the point in engaging people who don't understand the issues?" and I would really question that. I think if people are provided with good quality information that's relevant and meaningful for them, and the environment that is supportive to help understand the issues, they will bring tremendous insight and wisdom to the table, and we see it happen all the time. It's unlikely to happen in a quick and dirty process or a top-of-head kind of "what do you reckon?" question; it may require more time for people to think through things. But a good process, and if you're looking for a good outcome, it will be something that you might want to build into the process. And of course, we communicate to people on how their input affected the decision, getting back to people, closing the loop. The second-most highest complaint from people in these processes is, "We didn't hear anything. You never got back to us and told us what happened."

IAP2 does have an award process around this work. We look for good quality organisations that are doing this work particularly well. There's an international awards process and an Australasian awards process. I'm showing off, that that was mine. That's what sort of brought me into the organisation really, but I did do a very quick scan of some of them, over the last few years, and gosh, Amanda, I don't know what's happening, but Canada came up a lot, in these processes. The strategic quest project - it's a fascinating story, and I hope I've got it here - they just describe one of the things that was meaningful for them. They said, "The engagement of citizens and a diverse array of community stakeholders helped bring focus to the needed shift from an illness to a wellbeing model, in the delivery of health care and services" as one of the things that worked for them. I think it's really worth having a good look - these are all publicly available, by the way, these case studies - a really good look at Canada as a model. Similar governance structure to our own; a vast geography; remote communities; indigenous communities, and some really great stories in there, to learn from.

A second foundation of a robust and quality engagement process is that is it decision-oriented. I have been asked sometimes to help design an engagement process, and the first question I always ask is, "What is the decision or the issue or the problem?" and sometimes people will say, "Oh, well, we're not really sure," or "We just want people to come along and have their say." Now, let's try and unpack that a little bit more. What's going on? The very act of asking the question of somebody, implies a promise to do something about it. The very act of inquiry is in itself some kind of movement or shift and sets up an expectation.

So I would spend a lot of time at the beginning of a process, really defining what the issue on the table actually is, and checking that from a range of perspectives. Health care professionals will bring an issue from there, and even within your perspectives you might look at things quite differently, and it can be very confusing for people out there, if they're getting mixed messages.

Even within my organisation, five divisions, you know, multiple branches, we will spend several hours sometimes, and sometimes longer, checking in on the issue - and it wouldn't be unusual for it to change quite radically from what was first brought to the table, to what actually is ticked off, as the organisational issue that we are intending to take out for engagement.

Making a decision has to fit, from an IAP2 perspective, within a sustainable decision-making framework. We're not going to go and ask a whole lot of questions from people or get buy-in from somebody, on things that we can't deliver on. There will be a process, a rigorous process around looking at what is negotiable and what is not negotiable. It has to be within budget. It has to be within the legal framework. It has to be within what the organisation is capable of doing within a certain timeframe. There will be a whole lot of things that people want to talk to you about, but being clear and honest and open about what's on the table in the first place, is of utmost importance, and being absolutely clear about the role of your community, in that conversation.

The third foundation is that community engagement is goal driven. What are we wanting to achieve by doing this? What is the purpose, if you like, in undertaking community engagement? And people will generally say things like, "Well, we want people to understand the issues. We want to build relationships with people. We might want to grow knowledge. We might want to get feedback." So we would really unpack and identify what the purpose of the engagement is, because it's one of the things we're going to measure ourselves on, and determine how successful we actually are.

I know this is a busy slide. Has anybody seen this tool before, the IAP2 Spectrum of Engagement? One of the things that can help us in this work, about being really clear about promise to the public, is to determine how much input the public can actually have in the decision-making process, according to this table. More is not necessarily better. There is a real myth around that. We're not looking to empower people all the time. In fact, it would be inappropriate for us and organisations to do that, but being clear of purpose and clear of promise and clear of how people can influence the decision and to what level, will keep the conversation honest, if you like. If you can only inform about something and that's all you can do, then just be, you know, be straight and upfront about that. People will often say, "You came and you consulted us and made a promise to us that we would be listened to, and we would have influence in the decision, but really you'd already made up your mind." So your objectives around building relationships, building trust, are not going to be met if you're not clear around your level of influence.

There are enormous win-wins in doing this work well. According to a values framework, a foundational model, you will build confidence in the decisions that are made, and as decision makers - and I see this happen in my organisation. If my Mayor of Melbourne, for example, knows that the process that we've been through has been true, it has been with a broad range of stakeholders, we have sought public opinion, and here is what we can deliver to you, he will have a lot more confidence in making a decision. It will stand up to the test of being publicly acceptable. It does strengthen relationships.

The dialogue is amazing. People love it, don't they? I mean, you've seen this in the last couple of days here, people love talking about things that they care about and find meaningful. It does build trust and it is a better use of resources, and those of us in the industry, are getting much better at actually tracking what this costs in dollars and cents, and we can demonstrate, time and time again, that building this work into - particularly at the front-end of the decision-making process, can result in projects being delivered on time with a better use of staffing and resources. There are so many things we have to undo or stall on or deliver, that are not really hitting the mark for communities and wasting time and precious resources. It can be incredibly creative. The sorts of things that come out of these discussions are things that we, as decision makers, often haven't thought about. It can really open up a wonderful treasure trove of wisdom and knowledge.

I have pinched this slide. A colleague of mine, Mike Salvaris, in Melbourne, is doing a lot of work on developing community wellbeing indicators, and we're very interested in that work, in my organisation, and he draws these wonderful parallels between the work of community participation and wellbeing. We have some wonderful projects under way that are looking, sort of, of a lot more closely at this issue.

There is not time to talk about all of the other things that I appear to - and I am giving a plug for the organisation now - it certainly was incredibly helpful to me when I found it; it was, like, thank God, somebody else has been doing this thinking around this work and providing these kind of frameworks. But there is a whole lot of work, where we're looking at, around deliberation and dialogue. How can we have meaningful conversations? How can we encourage people to really think through, deliberate on complex issues, the complex issues of the world: health care; climate change; disaster management, and there are some beautiful opportunities - and the following speakers are going to refer to some of the deliberative sort of processes that they have been involved in. There's a whole lot of work occurring around the use of technology that's just wonderful, when looking - the Canadian models did use a lot of online technology in their award-winning processes. I'm not suggesting that's everything, and a lot of people will want face-to-face opportunities as well, but there is just some wonderful things occurring that you will find more information on, through IAP2.

There is also training and networking opportunities. We do deliver a certificate in community engagement for people. It's kind of a hard thing to get, isn't it? I mean, it's not as if universities are doing this work yet; it's really only starting in its infancy, so we can provide some skills and tools. And there is a practitioner Code of Ethics that we adhere to, to ensure that, if you're getting someone who wears and IAP2 badge, that you will get a good quality process around this work.

So I'm just going to leave you with a couple of questions for you to think about, deliberate on, engaged with each other. So what is it, what is it that you want to talk to your communities of interest about? What do you identify as the issue or the issues or the problem, and the opportunities that might be there? Who is your community? Who is this conversation taking place with, or should be taking place with, and what is it that's really important to them? What might be the question? And we would spend a lot of time thinking, dialoguing through the question, so that it is a strategic question; it is an appreciative inquiry-type question; a life-giving

question, because you will get much more buy-in from the community, than if you go out and say, "What doesn't work here?"

Thank you, everybody.