Many of you will be familiar with Sherry Arnstein’s “Ladder of Participation” which created a hierarchy of steps in community participation, leading up from tokenistic information provision to more engaging means of consultation, participation and control. This has provided a framework for professional engagement since the 1960s. However my framework is adding a couple of notches to the ladder – it is looking towards a situation where the community moves from having a stake in governance to becoming an active partner. I think we are getting near the top!

I will outline what I think some of the steps should be in this process.

1. Recognising what people know
2. Giving people a voice
3. Having a conversation
4. Building relationships
5. Two way learning
6. Working together
7. Handing over control
8. Developing partnerships.
Much of what I will be talking about reflects my past experience of working with Australia’s Indigenous peoples. However I have also referred to my early experience of working in Africa, my broader experience of work in Europe and the Asia Pacific Region, and my most recent experience of working for the Australian City of Ballarat. I recognise that there is no “one-size-fits-all” model, but there are some generic processes that I want to put forward for consideration.

1. Recognising what people already know

You may have heard how the Inuit (Eskimos) allegedly have over nine words for different types of snow. Well did you know the Saami (Lapps) have over 50 words to describe the different characteristics of a reindeer’s antler? (Magga, 2005) And that is without even starting to talk about the colour! This subtlety of language is not just about translating words (more of that later) but about the richness of knowledge that is locked within particular languages.

In Australia there is a network of community based “Indigenous Knowledge Centres that have been set up in some 20 remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. These receive very meagre external funding and they rely entirely on community members to manage the programs. They are quite the most exciting development in Indigenous affairs in Australia for some time, as there is a genuine feeling of community empowerment, capturing and celebrating knowledge systems that were in danger of disappearing altogether. Some of these are really important for the mainstream culture in Australia. For example, traditional methods of fire management (through cool burning) are highly beneficial to the Australian bush, and there is much to learn from the traditional clan systems of catchment management.

The following categories of indigenous knowledge systems have been listed by the Alaskan Rural Systematic Initiative:

- animal behaviour
- clothing design/insulation
- edible plants/diet/nutrition
- food preservation/preparation
- hunting/fishing/trapping
- medicinal plants/medical knowledge
- pattern recognition
- seasonal change/cycles
- tools/technology
- waste disposal
- weather forecasting
- building design/materials
- counting/measurements/estimation
- fire/heating/cooking
- geneology
- language/terminology/concepts
- observation skills
- rules of survival/safety
- star knowledge/constellations
- transportation
- weapons.
Australian Aboriginal knowledge systems are thought to be by far the oldest in the world, harking back prior to the last ice age, to times when sea levels were much lower, and when ecological systems were quite different from those with which we are familiar.

A common mistake made is to dismiss Indigenous knowledge systems because they are not written down. This probably comes from the failings of modern western culture where oral knowledge is weak, often corrupted by inaccurate repetition – a phenomenon sometimes termed “Chinese Whispers”, after a game that has nothing to do with anything Chinese. However some oral traditions are so strong that long recitations are passed down unchanged through hundred of years, like the chants of the Ifugao people in the Philippines which can take up to three days to complete. Aboriginal songlines are teaching stories that are recited as people pass through the landscape and they appear to have been passed down through the generations for thousands of years. Of course these oral knowledge systems are vulnerable in the modern age, much as the papyrus-based knowledge systems of the ancient Mediterranean Phoenicians were vulnerable in their time (all records having since decayed). Nowadays our knowledge records are vulnerable to computer viruses and superseded software, to say nothing of solar flares.

Our lack of respect for the oral tradition was brought home to me recently when an expatriate colleague who had been living in the Solomon Islands for some years explained to me that she wanted to put together a local cookbook, and she knew that I had some interest in this. Actually a couple of my Solomon Island friends also wanted to put together a cook book, and between them they had hundreds of traditional recipes, some of which they had tried out on me (with excellent results). I thought there could be some basis for collaboration until I started to explain how my friends had a sound knowledge of the medicinal properties of some foodstuffs, and could tailor their recipes for particular illnesses such as diabetes. My expatriate colleague was aghast that this sort of traditional knowledge, founded in a long history of practice, might be incorporated into the cookbook, because it was not written down in any conventional way, and therefore could not be relied upon.

In situations where the community is not indigenous to its environment, there is still important knowledge that some or all community members have which the most expert of experts will lack. Community members should be acknowledged as having expertise in terms of their own culture and environment, and unless there is respect for this field of expertise there is a poor basis for community engagement. That is when the safety audit process gets me excited – it puts the community knowledge first and then builds on it. Conducting safety audits is a process that has been widely used in many different cultural contexts to help local people identify and then address safety issues in their local environment. People who move around a particular neighbourhood on a regular basis know what areas are safe or unsafe, as well where people feel unsafe. They can easily be assisted to look more closely at why this is so, and then identify community safety strategies that they can implement themselves. If they can do that in relating to safety, they can extend this more broadly to environmental awareness and expertise.

Apart from knowledge, all communities have particular skills which should be valued, and these may not be well anticipated by outsider professionals. For example, indigenous people the world over seem to have an excellent ability to perceive space in plan form or aerial view, much more so than many well educated western communities. I once discussed this with a psychologist who was doing research into the perception of Aboriginal children, and it was explained to me that a traditional nomadic way of life required an ability to perceive objects as separated and mapped entities, but that the same perceptive strength also seemed to present difficulties in learning to read in the conventional western manner because it was linked with dyslexia. We need to work with the strengths, which might consist of plenty of plans and minimal writing.

2. Giving people a voice
Having recognised that community members have important expertise, there needs to be a framework within which they can communicate their knowledge, as well as their needs and aspirations for a better environment.

Giving people a voice does not mean just providing an interpreter, but this can be an important first step. It is amazing how often professional experts make assumption about the capacity of grassroots people to understand them when they speak in a foreign language, and demand that they communicate in that language. In Australia the justice system operated on that basis for many decades, with well documented miscarriages of justice simply because of miscommunication by Aboriginal people accused of various crimes. When English is your third or fourth language (as is common in many remote Aboriginal communities) it is easy to interpret a sentence in English as meaning exactly the opposite of what was intended, and vice versa. If you are familiar with telephone voice directories that despite having access to the best computerised translations available still interpret the “Royal Blind Service” as the “Rural Buying Service” you will appreciate how this is possible’ Added to this is the politeness of Aboriginal (and other) people which inclines them to answer in the affirmative even when they don’t understand. You are probably familiar with many other situations where people will say “yes” just to hurry along an uncomfortable situation or get rid of a troublesome visitor.

So, providing for a means of communication in a person’s native tongue is a first requirement for effective communication, but there is much more. We really need to put language into its cultural context if we are to reach across the language divide. There is an excellent book about health care amongst Aboriginal people in remote Arnhemland called “Why Warriors Lie Down and Die” which vividly conveys the importance of cultural in language, and how misunderstandings can have fatal results. The Aboriginal framework for health is highly sophisticated, relying on a holistic synthesis of healthy mind-body-spirit. Talking about disease outside this framework does not compute.

There are also some constraints to language. Some languages have no conditional verbs, so talking hypothetically about what might happen IF something else occurs can be meaningless. These are often survival cultures where dealing with the here and now is quite enough of a challenge. More of that later. On the other hand there is richness of communication which defies being put into words of any language. Consider the Adinkra symbols of Ghana, where a single symbol encapsulates whole paragraphs of meaning, calling up stories from the past and drawing moral conclusions.

Giving people a voice sometimes means resorting to non-verbal communication. I had some experience of this in a remote Aboriginal community called Yalata in South Australia, working with Save the Children. Most of the kids were thought to be at risk of sexual abuse, substance abuse, malnutrition and violence, due to poverty, overcrowding in the home, and social dysfunction in the community. The school was doing its best but relied largely on inexperienced non-Indigenous teachers who didn’t know how to communicate (local community members spoke very little if any English) and who burnt out quickly. There was some positive potential in the local youth centre, but this was usually closed because of lack of people to supervise it. We opened up the youth centre and played games for two weeks solid – it was exhausting. We also provided food of course. Some of the games were particularly geared to giving the kids a voice, including a graffiti wall that grew to cover most of the centre with some very telling words and pictures, and a 3D model of the community which was steadily built and added to. Once the kids knew we were on their side we persuaded the teachers to let us into the classroom, and we did more structured things like keeping a diary in the English class, and taking over the music class to compose a new song (which was then performed). We titled the final report “Yell Out Yalata”.

Giving people a voice sometimes requires getting around “gatekeepers” or other communication blockages. An illustration of the need to circumvent gatekeepers comes from Zebila, the village in Ghana that I came to know in the 1970s. Local leadership amongst the Kusasi tribespeople does not fit the western model, as it relies on the spiritual earth priest or tendana. When the British imposed an
administrative structure they were unable to deal with a system that lacked chiefs, so they appointed people from a neighbouring tribe to be the chiefs of each village and town. I had to get through my official meeting with the Zebila chief, so I could then have more meaningful conversations with the Kusasi villagers including the *tendana*. In recent times the Ghanaian government took steps to scrap this artificial governance system and hand back leadership to the Kusasi. I’ll come back to that later.

3. Having a conversation

To engage in a conversation, there needs to be an exchange of questions and information, and a sharing of views. Too often in our line of work the framework for community engagement is too limited for this to occur. I recall being handed a contract to consult with traditional Indigenous owners all over Australia on their aspirations for land management, with the client being a particular government agency that provided resources for Indigenous land acquisition and use. We found that many land owner groups wanted to have a conversation about something else, ie provide feedback on the past performance of our client agency, and we attempted to deal with both agendas in a respectful and constructive way. However when we provided the feedback to our client, the agency was incensed (even though we had sanitised some very angry feedback to be quite constructive) claiming that this was beyond our brief. Well you simply can’t have a one way conversation.

A very good example of this was documented by Australian researcher Tim Rowse. It is actually two one-way conversations, neither engaging with the other. One party wants to talk about a swimming pool, and the other wants to talk about governance issues. It goes something like this...

*Visiting politician:* Do you members of the Council want to make a statement to the Committee?
*Community leader:* The Community Council is worried about putting in a swimming pool.
*Visiting politician:* What have you done to plan for a swimming pool?
*Community leader:* We have been talking about a swimming pool ever since the community was small, and we are still talking about it.
*Visiting politician:* What sized swimming pool are you after, a big pool or a small pool?
*Community leader:* We need a pool for everyone here.
*Visiting politician:* Perhaps there are other things that you need first. Before we answer that, perhaps you could tell us how the Council operates. How do you elect your councillors?
*Community leader:* we have been waiting for five years for a swimming pool. We need it here for all the people.
*Visiting politician:* The question of a swimming pool will have to be addressed to either the Department of Aboriginal Affairs or the Northern Territory Government... Does the Council meet regularly as a full council and how often does it meet?
*Community leader:* The Council has been meeting often and discussing this issue of a swimming pool.

Tailoring a conversation to deal with two sets of priorities sometimes leads you into the unknown. When I was asked to look at a problem of “youth crime” in a particular community I made a point of talking to the purported young criminals about what was happening in an open ended way. I had been told that they were camping out at night, breaking into the local store, and failing to turn up for school. This was a community with a very high level of substance abuse, with consequent erosion of community values and behavioural norms. First we asked the young people to map out the spaces they went to and the places they avoided, and then we stated asking why. It emerged that the home was the last place the children wanted to be, because their parents were often drugged or drunk, and because the partying visitors created serious dangers of child abuse. In the face of this, the children sought protection with their peers and camped out in the bush, breaking into the local store to get food because they weren’t being fed at home. It was often cold at night so the kids didn’t sleep well, and
had to catch up in the daytime instead of going to school. The “Youth Crime” problem was redefined as a parenting problem, and the appropriate services were called in.

4. Building relationships

This is all about trust. Too often as a professional I have been required to carry out work on a fly-in fly-out basis, and I have tried to resist this way of operating. To gain real understanding about the people in a given community or neighbourhood there needs to be more than a superficial inspection. There needs to be an appreciation of people’s resources, needs, aspirations and fears. These things won’t be revealed instantaneously.

I recall when I was first in West Africa in the 1970s, I was trying to understand why people were shifting from the villages into urban shanty towns. It seems to me that they were much better off in the villages, not only socially but also in cold hard economic terms. OK there were some seasonal food shortages at the end of the dry season, but people usually had enough put by to last out the year. Once the millet was growing there was an abundance of porridge and pito (millet beer) as well as livestock products and groundnuts. My Ghanaian research assistant Azumah came from the village of Zebila, and knew everyone personally. He lived in an urban zongo and knew all his tribesmen there too. We decided to explore by interviewing pairs of siblings, one who had migrated and one who had not, to see what factors were influential. I developed a questionnaire and we worked together on making it compatible with local language and cultural understanding. But the results made no sense at all. I sent Azumah back to the same people basically to say “what a load of rubbish, now tell us the real reason”, something a stranger would not be able to do. Again we got rubbish results. But we didn’t give up and Azumah used all his powers of persuasion when he went back a third time. Then the truth emerged – witchcraft was a critical factor, and not something people talked about readily. The problem was that young people in the village were aware of the cultural constraints on their lives compared with life in the city, and they often rebelled. In particular, young people often wanted to get married by choice rather than convention, and if they eloped they were scared that a witch would track them down and hurt or kill them. I have more recently been working in the Papua New Guinean town of Kundiawa and when I related this story it was greeted with “Yes, that’s the reason for rural-urban migration here too”.

I went back to Zebila in 2007 to find it in crisis because of unprecedented flooding. The arid Sahel region is threatened by already evident climate change, and there has been a succession of floods since 2007. We had many discussions about what would happen as a result of the flooding (loss of livestock and crops, disintegrating mud buildings, destroyed roads and bridges) and how this would accelerate rural-urban migration unless there was a planning framework put in place. However I was only told later about how tribal warfare then erupted because of the local community being weakened, as a payback from neighbouring tribesman for their loss of the chieftainship positions (which I described earlier).

Does it matter whether people migrate to the cities for economic reasons or because of sorcery or warfare? You bet it does. We can’t possibly start to address the social, cultural and economic ramifications of the rural-urban drift if we don’t understand what is driving it. If we haven’t established a trusting relationship, we simply won’t be told the truth.

But the relationship-building is not only essential to finding out information. What my framework for intervention is leading to next is a phase of working together. No-one is going to invest their time and resources into the partnership unless there is reciprocal trust. We need to find a practical way of demonstrating that we can be trusted. My colleague Paul Pholeros is concerned about the environmental health of Aboriginal communities and he refuses to go into a community unless he can take his tradesman’s toolkit and fix things – particularly plumbing and drainage, as well as anything
that looks unsafe. That’s a good way of building relationships, and I sometimes wish I had his tradesman skills. I work with what I have, and usually end up helping people cope with paperwork, or advocating for their interests with external agencies on issues outside my brief. Hopefully we can all find a way of demonstrating that we are not a waste of space.

5. Two way learning

The idea of two-way learning (transferring skills and knowledge two ways) is well promoted in the Indigenous Knowledge Centres that I am familiar with. These little centres (sometimes no more than a small room) embrace both the capturing of local knowledge systems and providing a window into the world using western knowledge systems. Local adults and children are often amazed at how they can apply simple tools to learn about themselves and the rest of the world, and the facilities are very well used.

The concept of two way learning and practice is gradually becoming more accepted in the area of health service delivery to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people in Australia. Remote area clinics are usually staffed by a combination of non-Indigenous health professionals and community based health workers. The non-Indigenous doctors and nurses rely on the health workers for cultural guidance. This includes, for example, making sure that people from different incompatible skin groups do not have to wait together in the same waiting room, as this would be a breach of cultural law. Cultural guidance may be necessary where cultural law has been put into action, which may mean someone has been speared as punishment, and they may present to the clinic for treatment. If a nurse treats this person they may become the target of punishment themselves. A two way learning process can find ways though this quagmire of conflicting cultural practices and keep everyone safe. Going beyond cultural safety, in some localities western practitioners are becoming more accepting of traditional medicine, and seeking to work alongside traditional healers. People who are sick are quite likely to go to the clinic as well as consulting a traditional healer, so it is a much better solution for the two medical disciplines to work together.

A two way justice system is also developing in some areas, incorporating both western and traditional law, with modifications to each system.

Two way learning can be applied to any situation. When getting to know a new community I try to identify someone in advance who can work alongside me as a cultural or local community advisor. I then try to identify people who will be able to drive the process of community capacity building in my absence, and look for any opportunity to transfer skills through practice. I need to learn from these people and hopefully I can give something in return.

6. Working together

As a consultant it would be a lot easier and quicker to breeze into a community, do a quick appraisal, draw up detailed plans and implementation strategies on my own and present the documented results to my client with an invoice. However the outcome would most likely be useless at best and counterproductive at worst. Planning together with community members is much slower and demanding, but it can also be a heap of fun. There are some tools that I have found useful to this process, and I want to outline just a couple of these – using photographs and making 3D models.

“Photolanguage” in Australia refers to a facilitation tool developed by Catholic Education, and made available in published form for anyone else to apply. I don’t know if there is an equivalent produced in other countries. It consists of 200 fairly ambiguous and evocative black and white photographs. That’s all. As a facilitation tool the photos are typically spread out over a large area (usually the floor
or ground) and participants are asked to select the pictures that they feel speak to them on an emotive level, in response to particular questions. For example in a planning workshop I might ask people to select one photograph that typifies the community now, and another to show how they would like it to be in 5, 10 or 50 years’ time. Another more exploratory use would be to ask people to select a photograph that reminds them of an event in their own lives, that they are prepared to speak about. Once the selection process has taken place, participants are invited to talk about why they selected the particular photographs and what they represent.

I was introduced to the use of “Photolanguage by my Aboriginal friend Julie Smith. I was astounded at the results the first time I saw it in use. People who wouldn’t normally say boo to a goose were suddenly vocalising about their lives, and speaking from the heart. It was hard to get them to stop. It unleashed a wealth of information that could be processed into a planning framework of goals and objectives which had real meaning for the community. I have since used this tool in a number of different environments and cultures, and it always seems to work well. I produced a customised version of Photolanguage for my recent project looking at market improvements through Melanesia, as 200 black and white images of all kinds of markets.

The next tool I want to talk about is making models. The first time I used this approach was in the remote Aboriginal community of Epenarra, located in the Central Desert. I was working alongside a male colleague, so that we could deal with the separation of gender issues within the community. We were also working alongside a husband and wife couple who lived in the community and were able to act as interpreters. Our interpreters alerted us to the language problem I have already referred to – the lack of the conditional, no translation of “if” and no cultural context for understanding hypothetical scenarios. This meant we had to make things real, so we decided to make a model. In the centre of this community there was a basketball court, and it was one of the better features of the community, so we decided to build the model there. We prepared blocks of wood in advance to represent buildings, and we sketched out the roads and other features in coloured chalk (reasonably to scale, using the squaring-up approach). We let our enthusiasm get the better of use and constructed bushes and trees by putting twigs into plasticine, but sadly this melted in the desert sun. The local school gave us playdough as a substitute, but did you know that a basic ingredient of playdough is flour? The camp dogs knew, and our film of the model making shows the landscaping being devoured by the occasional dog wandering through. The dogs had sore tummies that night.

The model was an outstanding success. Groups of men and women walked around deep in conversation for three days, trying out different configurations, then walking to the real sites and marking things out at full scale on the ground. Some of the consensus decision making took the full three days to be sorted out, and any shorter process would have been flawed. There was even a “house” (tin shed with illegal wiring) which caught fire at some point in the program, and we thought “that’s it, model over” but within half an hour people were back working with the model. It was so successful that when World Vision asked us to go back to the same community eight years later to review progress, we decided to remake the model. This time it was school holidays, and we became the de factor school holiday program for the kids. They constructed the model this time, and told us all about who was living where including who had left the community for a while, and who would be coming back, so we constructed a full 3D demographic profile using stick figures, annotated by the kids’ telling their family stories.

My more recent experience with model making has been a joy, working in the Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea to plan for improvements to existing markets and designing new markets. This time I compiled a collection of materials, started people off and let the process roll on. As the models progressed we broke to discuss design checklists, talk about good design practices, and identify site constraints. Grassroots community members quickly turned into planners, and were rightly proud of their models, wanting to immediately show them to others. This led us to take one model out to a roadside market to present it to the existing market traders in the pouring rain, and to take another to the local provincial government offices to make a presentation. I have made a note to myself to think
more carefully about weatherproofing the models, and make sure they are not too wide to fit through doorways.

Making models isn’t just so that the design and planning process becomes more accessible to grassroots people. A model making group in Port Moresby consisted of a mix of grassroots people and public servants, including senior engineering staff. Some of the divisional heads were reportedly not able to be in the same room without arguing. However, put them in the space with a model to make and they were all smiles, but they also got on with some serious work. The model of the notoriously congested Gordons Market quickly became the focus for rearranging the traffic management system, and the toy cars were used to good effect in trying out a new parking and one way drive-through system. The parking and loading bays were marked out in white pen on the black model base in meticulous detail, and with those present committed to immediately putting it into effect.

Working together might not mean working the way we usually do. We need to use different tools for engaging people in a stimulating and creative way.

7. Handing over control

As a consultant or any kind of paid professional, there is a need to ensure that when the job is done, the community is better off than before. Once we have worked together to discuss and plan how a neighbourhood can be improved, we can’t just get up and go, and we need a planned retreat. Community empowerment really means doing yourself out of a job as a professional, but don’t worry, there’s plenty more to do somewhere else.

Unfortunately the agencies footing the bill for development planning often require a retreat that is far too sudden, and leaves communities without the resources they need to follow through on the work that has been done. In working with Aboriginal communities in Australia, there is often a requirement to prepare a plan and that’s it, with inadequate provision of resources to implement the plan.

One of the first things to be done as part of any handover is to build up a strong support network within external agencies that are on the ground. This might be government agencies, NGOs and/or private sector businesses. Some of the individuals in these agencies can be identified as champions for a particular community, though it may be a mistake to rely to heavily on particular personalities (in case they move on).

Some of my community client groups have managed to get the resources for me to provide some longer term mentoring, and this seems to provide a valuable transition. Mentoring allows for a process of people doing things for themselves, but also provides helpline in case they get stuck. It makes good use of the relationships that have been established, but does not build long term dependence on outside help. The length of time for mentoring support would vary with the nature of the project, but could be 1-5 years as an example. However the level of support should be low level and provided only as needed.

8. Developing partnerships

In my new role within local government, the strategy of planned retreat is no longer appropriate. What I need now is a framework for developing new partnerships with local communities, which combine the strengths of the community and government sectors, also mobilising private sector resources where possible.
Some years ago I participated in a training program provided by the World Bank about development of what was termed “tri-sector partnerships”, ie across the public, private and community sectors. The training program was based on evaluation of a large number of partnership initiatives pursued in many different countries, and the lessons learnt from these were impressive. One important feature of successful partnerships was that the end results were worth much more than the sum of the parts. That means that if you put the resources of the three sectors together in the best possible way, each acknowledging what they do best, then there is significant added value. But there are some important pitfalls to avoid in terms of different sectors taking on an inappropriate role. For example private sector organisations (mining companies as an example) are not the most appropriate agencies to take on a community development role, with all the best will in the world. However what they are good at is constructing roads and other infrastructure, and their resources include access to heavy equipment. Government agencies can use their regulatory and governance roles in ways not available to other sectors. Communities often have both human and material resources that they can mobilise, as well as intimate knowledge of what is needed in a given situation.

Opportunities for communities to generate their own economic resources are often there to be found even in the poorest societies, as was well illustrated by my recent work with fresh produce markets in Melanesia. Although individual market traders may be amongst the poorest in the community, they are participants in an economic entity which may turn over literally millions of dollars per year (at least for the larger markets). Markets are often held back from reaching their full economic potential by a web of misunderstanding about their importance on the part of governments and donor agencies. This important project, sponsored by UNIFEM, looked at ways of helping market vendors do things for themselves in a number of highly cost effective ways, so their businesses became more profitable and their working conditions were improved. Some of the improvements were capable of being self-funded without any external assistance, simply by looking at how the money worked and helping the traders make it flow better. Others needed external assistance, but had prospects of being highly cost effective.

An example from a more developed economy is provided by the Australian village of Woodford, which was faced with the collapse of local employment some years ago when the Woodford prison was due to close. I was asked by the local council to work with the community on a particular project that had local support – development of a herb industry. The community was not well off, and there was no promise of government funding to drive this venture. My team carried out an assessment of what local resources were available to the community which could be mobilised for this venture. We found that everything was at hand. There were disused tobacco drying sheds, decommissioned tea tree distilleries, surplus irrigation systems, nurseries with capacity to expand, retired people with relevant skills, who were keen to train others, and plenty of people with land who wanted to get involved.

I remember long ago being lectured by an American small business guru that when looking at small business growth it was important to put the money last and the human outcomes first. If people are preoccupied with how much things will cost, or how much they can get in the way of loans and grants, this can get in the way of sorting out what they really want to do. That’s probably a good credo for any form of community development. The money will be needed, and some types of infrastructure need lots of it, but it will certainly go much further if we learn to work with community structures, processes and strengths. In fact there has been some extensive and rigorous research done on this very issue, which proves that the monetary value of investments in capital infrastructure can be more than doubled if appropriate community capacity building is in place.

But back to partnership development. The World Bank Tri-Sector Partnership Framework suggest that the key ingredients are:

- recognising which role is appropriate for each partner
- building respectful relationships between the partners
- pooling the resources of all the sectors
- turning the relationships into partnerships
- investing in maintaining the partnership approach
- reviewing and reconfiguring partnerships.

Many of the tools and skills needed for building partnerships are similar to those we need for effective community engagement – recognising the knowledge of others, having a respectful conversation, building capacity through mutual learning etc. And most important of all, there has to be a reason for the partnership – a shared goal around something that is very important to all the potential partners.

In the City of Ballarat, I have been asked by the Council to work with two particular local communities, and I am keen to develop a partnership framework in each case. These might be as follows.

**Miners Rest** is a peripheral settlement on the north side which is marginalised from urban services, and which has very little social infrastructure. It is also plagued by flooding, with three severe floods over the past two years leading to people being evacuated from their houses for extended periods. Because the flooding is a key concern for everyone, this seems to be the appropriate place to start a conversation. There is much to be learnt from recent flooding here and in other localities (some of which have experienced even more severe emergencies) about what has and has not worked, and how local government could work with local communities more effectively. An emergency event demands a partnership approach like no other, with different agencies contributing resources first to minimise risk and harm, and then to support recovery. If a respectful and trusting relationship can be built around this issue, then there may be a good foundation for partnering in a broader long term development agenda.

**Buninyong** is a completely different settlement, peripheral to the urban area on the south side. This is a relatively affluent community, and one which has already demonstrated excellent capacity to successfully advocate for local infrastructure. There are some 43 local community groups, many of which are sporting or recreation clubs. The local progress association is keen to transform itself into a village committee (an unusual structure for Australia) on which all the different groups can be represented. Here there is the possibility to build a completely different partnership. The aim would be to make more effective use of the facilities already provided to the community by Council and others, recognising the community’s capacity for self-help. At the moment there is a tendency for each club to control its own territory, whereas everyone can benefit if there is multi-use of facilities in a way that broadens community access. This will make it more realistic to maintain all the assets that the local community has, so they do not deteriorate over time. The local government role can be to facilitate a broad governance framework and to provide incentives for resource sharing by plugging some of the gaps.

I think partnership arrangements such as these are essential if local government is to address local needs effectively. There is no chance we can do this on our own, as there will never be enough resources to meet local needs in a paternalistic way. We need to harness community resources as well, and work out how to pool government resources with those of the local community.

You may be familiar with the debate about whether governments should adopt a “welfare” or “empowerment” model when working with their clients. I think this debate is just as applicable to whole communities. We are likely to be much more successful in making cost effective investments if we rely on local expertise to tell us what is needed, and we build the capacity of communities to do things for themselves.
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<th>Welfare model</th>
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<tr>
<td>establish consistent benchmarks for acceptable levels of service provision and wellbeing across different localities</td>
<td>encourage communities to identify local needs and aspirations using their own values, recognising that these may vary between different areas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>decide what should be provided to individual people or families so that they achieve the acceptable level of wellbeing as externally defined</td>
<td>communities state what resources they require to meet the needs they identify, with capacity building support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>allocate services to each individual or family so that they can achieve the acceptable standard of wellbeing</td>
<td>external agencies provide resources to communities for them to allocate according to local priorities, plus communities identify and apply their own resources</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the context of less affluent societies, the imperative for partnerships is compelling. There is even less chance that governments can make the investments necessary to keep pace with urban growth without an effective partnership that mobilises other resources. Local communities have inner resilience, knowledge, skills and organisational capacity as well as cumulative material resources, which are vital to any development agenda. We can work with grassroots communities to build their self-help capacity, and to figure out where to target scarce resources for greatest benefit.

I’d like to end with a quotation from Anna Tibaijuka, previous Executive Director of UN Habitat.

“We are in the business of promoting a culture of solidarity and inclusiveness in all human settlements, Cities will not become liveable places without learning from the solidarity which is practiced in villages where everyone is provided for, however modestly. In my village, I never saw anyone sleeping under a tree.”

For those of you who want to know more about some of the tools for community engagement and capacity building that I have referred to, I do have some copies of my book “Gnarly Planning: tools for local and global action”, and you can also download it from the Internet at www.gnarlyplanning.com.
References


Rowse, Tim (undated) *Remote Possibilities*, unpublished paper provided by Tangentyere Council, Alice Springs