

## **Planning to incorporate community participation? City visioning strategies and institutional challenges**

### **Introduction**

This paper considers the community consultation processes utilised by state and local governments in two Australian cities – namely, Melbourne and Hobart – in ‘community visioning’ projects for city strategic plans. In exploring aspects of the policy, governance and planning contexts for community consultation, especially the difficulties in connecting with hard to reach populations, this paper concludes that processes of public participation require re-evaluation throughout the duration of the consultation.

These visioning strategies - *Melbourne 2030* and *Hobart 2025* – were developed at a time of increased focus on local community embedded approaches and local governments capacity to strengthen and integrate divergent communities. New legislative requirements in most Australian states coupled with pressure from the planning profession, environmental groups and local communities has forced local governments to investigate ways to adopt consultation processes which seek to work with communities to address local issues (Brackertz, N, *et al* 2005; Australian Local Government Association, 1993; White, 2000; Young, 2001). Over the past five years, the ‘community’ agenda has been firmly reinstated into Australian state and local policies, many of which guide consultation frameworks. ‘Community visioning’ is one method of fostering a more ‘participatory’ planning practice by sharing and integrating divergent knowledge about place (Ames, 1997; White, 2000; Healey, 1998).

Contemporary international planning literature emphasizes how local planning processes can benefit from directly involving a cross section of people, who have an interest in or may be affected by planning outcomes (Healey, 1998; Cuthill, 2004; Mega, 1999; Gleeson & Low, 2000, Carson & Gelber, 2001; Gaventa, 2001; Jackson, 2001). Active citizens are people who are engaged in and contribute to making ‘better places’, ‘better decisions’ and ‘better services’. Local governments face the perennial problem of determining how representative are the opinions of more vocal and active community members, and how can groups who are usually hard to reach be incorporated into decision-making processes. Often the motivation for disengagement in local political life is unclear and could be caused from a number of factors like disadvantage, barriers to participation, being time poor or the result of ‘rational apathy’ (Brackertz, N, *et al* 2005).

This paper is presented in sections. First, the policy context for community consultation processes is described before the role of participation in various planning models and the institutional challenges facing local governments are considered. Then, a review of the processes involved in *Melbourne 2030* and *Hobart 2025*’s community consultation is covered. Finally, using new methods for community consultation and data collation to ensure greater numbers of hard to reach populations in community consultation processes are explored.

### **Policy context and Statutory Framework for Local Government Consultation**

There are three spheres of government in Australia: the Australian (Commonwealth) Government, State Governments and Local Governments. There is significant support for the premise, for example from the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, that local government plays an important role in facilitating

opportunities for interactions and participation in local sustainability issues (International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives, 1997; Cuthill & Fien, 2004, Good Governance Advisory Group, 2004; Brackertz, N, *et al* 2005).

State government policies in Victoria and Tasmania support local councils' consultation efforts and provide a more formal rationale. However, the view has also been expressed that some state government policies and processes tend to complicate community consultation, as they can be inflexible in providing funding or in timelines and resources. In the 1990s the local government sector in Australia was reshaped to introduce new market practices, management methods, like strategic planning, and governance aspects (Marshall and Sproats, 2000). New legislation in all states resulted in the amalgamation of small authorities. Greater involvement of citizens was then seen as necessary as the new larger municipalities had fewer elected representatives. To this end, new statutory requirements prescribed the involvement of citizens in the strategic planning cycle, so as to provide an avenue for public involvement in the management of local issues.

At the local government level, the policy context for community consultation in Victorian councils is established by the *Local Government Act 1989* and the *Local Government (Democratic Reform) Act 2003*. The latter states that the primary objective of a council is "to endeavour to achieve the best outcomes for the local community having regard to the long-term and cumulative effects of decisions" (Local Government (Democratic Reform) Act 2003). Councils must "ensure that resources are used efficiently and effectively and services are provided in accordance with the Best Value Principles to best meet the local community" (Local Government Act S.3C). The Act also addresses issues of "good governance" including transparency, probity, democratic representation, accountable financial management and public reporting. Councils are required to produce a Council Plan (corporate plan) stating the strategic objectives and strategies for a minimum four-year period. This guiding document is to be drawn up in consultation with the community after each council election and is to be reviewed annually.

In Melbourne's home state of Victoria, local government requirements exist alongside the state based comprehensive 'Community Strengthening' Agenda. In 1999, when the Victorian left-wing Labor Government was elected, the community strengthening agenda started via the '*Growing Victoria Together Summit*' with a focus on economic, social and environmental responsibilities and commitment to a more inclusive society by 2010. One of the 11 'important issues' included in '*Growing Victoria Together*' was identified as 'Building cohesive communities and reducing inequalities'.

By November 2003 the Labor Government was re-elected, this time with a majority in both Houses of Parliament, and went on to establish the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) by amalgamating a broad range of government portfolio's including Local Government. The logic behind this was to unite portfolios relating to the two dimensions of community – people and place – into one consolidated Department. The DVCs stated vision was to build "more active, confident, and resilient communities". In 2005, the Government released a social policy action plan, *A Fairer Victoria: Creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage* with 14 strategies and 85 actions costed at \$785 million over four years. *A Fairer Victoria* and an aligned DVC publication, *Actions for Community Strengthening with Local Government*, cites a number of new ways government was to engage with and link citizens and policy-makers at local and regional levels including a strong commitment

to mandating local government as a key platform for community strengthening initiatives (Wiseman, 2005)

The Victorian Local Government Association (VLGA) sees good governance as the guiding principle of councils' activities, with "consultation and participation being tools to achieve the desired outcome of engagement". VLGA defines consultation as the process of informed communication between the council and the community on an issue prior to the council making a decision or determining a direction on that issue. Consultation is more about input into decision-making, collecting information to inform decisions rather than joint decision-making or decision-making by referendum (Brackertz, N, *et al* 2005). For local governments, the central problem is how to ensure that their processes of democratic decision-making are legitimate (representative and accountable) and that they meet their statutory obligation to engage in wide consultations.

The principal legislation establishing the powers and functions of councils in Tasmania is the *Local Government Act 1993* (the Act). Section 20 describes the role of councils as:

- To provide for the health, safety and welfare of the community
- To represent the interests of the community
- To provide for the peace, order and good government of the municipal area.

For the purposes of strategic planning, section 66 of the Act states:

- (1) A council is to prepare a strategic plan for the municipal area
- (2) A strategic plan is to be in respect of at least a 5 year period and updated as required
- (3) In preparing a proposed strategic plan or updating an existing strategic plan, a council is to consult with the community in its municipal area and any authorities and bodies it considers appropriate.

A definition of consultation is not provided in the Act.

In Tasmania, local government is required to relate and assess their planning, future visions and goals in line with the state-wide strategic vision of *Tasmania Together*. *Tasmania Together* was initiated in 1999 and launched in 2001 as an overarching framework for state government partnerships with industry, local government and the community. It was seen as a "bold exercise in participatory governance" based on the reorientation of "policy and state budget priorities according to community will...and linked to its benchmarking and annual reporting process" (Crowley, 2005: 1).

*Tasmania Together* is described as a "a world-leading system of community goal setting and measurement of progress is enshrined in law and used to guide decision-making in the government, business and community sectors". Its original form comprised of 24 goals and 212 benchmarks, but as an iterative document, there is legislation provision to allow for changes to goals and benchmarks in terms of additions, deletions or alterations to be put to State Parliament. Progress towards the achievement of the goals and benchmarks is monitored by an Independent Statutory Authority - the *Tasmania Together* Progress Board - and results are reported through the Parliament.

The consultation process with Tasmanian's around the state took two-and-a-half years and after each five years a review is scheduled by legislation which must incorporate a short revisit and repeat of the whole consultative process. *Tasmania*

*Together* is “an Australian first” as a “people driven 20 year social, environmental and economic plan” (Crowley, 2005: 9). It was modelled on strategic planning efforts in Ireland, in Oregon, Vermont and Minnesota in the United States, and in Alberta, Canada. The conceptual framework for *Tasmania Together* relied on connecting multiple pathways within a ‘bottom-up’ community derived plan with ‘top-down’ political commitment and authority. It satisfies the OECD’s criteria (which includes policy integration, participation and knowledge management) for the pursuit of sustainability and relies on ongoing community engagement in its implementation.

### **Consultation context and planning models**

Australia has also experienced a crisis of confidence in public institutions, representative democracy and process-oriented hierarchical models of bureaucracy. Validity and legitimacy concerns in relation to traditional state intervention and provision of services have been revisited and questioned over the past decade. Less people trust the government. In Australia, the number of people who felt that government was ‘usually or sometimes trustworthy’ declined from 46 per cent to 37 per cent over the past three decades (Goot, 2002). Research in the 1980s suggested that many Australians considered their local politicians to be, at best, incompetent and, at worst, corrupt (Bowman, 1983). Several academics have, in assessing the broader debate on democracy cast doubt on the notion that it is a new problem of civic disengagement (Hindess, 2002).

Increasingly, positive interpretations of ‘governance’ have been mobilised, advocating more ‘partnerships’ and ‘networks’ between private and non-government organisations and citizens as individual actors to address problems in new ways. Some commentators see governance as emerging through the development of complex networks and the rise of more ‘bottom-up’ approaches to decision-making. Following this line of argument support for governance models is in response to a convergence of political imperatives to address this issue of ‘trust’ and the management drive to improve service delivery (Pierre and Peters, 2000; Blacher, 2005). Local governance potentially has the capacity to demonstrate responsiveness to communities by encouraging debates, collecting diverse views and opening up transparent processes of participation.

Current literature indicates that local governance policies and processes designed to facilitate and support community participation provide multiple positive returns for all involved (Munro-Clark, 1992; Blaxter *et al*; 2003; Gaventa, 2001; Whittaker, 1996; Davis 2001; UNDP, 1997). This includes the premise that increased community participation in local governance leads to greater support for government policies (Creighton, 1992), strengthening the legitimacy of government (Amalric, 1998; Williams, 1998) and disperses power across the community redressing social injustice or exclusion (Cat and Murphy, 2003: 525) building a broad-based sense of ownership of community issues or increased social capital (Lowndes and Wilson, 2001). These positive outcomes suggest a self-reinforcing process whereby local governments who support and implement citizen participation create and foster the building and rebuilding of social capital to strengthen democratic governance and facilitate sustainable outcomes.

Many Victorian and Tasmanian local governments have, over the last decade, allocated time and resources to the process of consulting community members about local issues and decisions, while seeking to build a closer relationship between councils, community members and community groups other stakeholders. Methods of consultation used and the range of participants involved primarily depends on the

context, aim and issue being addressed. There is a diverse list of innovative participatory approaches for councils to choose from – e.g. community visioning, citizen juries, search conferences – which “introduce a rich citizen perspective into local governance processes which can complement the oftentimes quantitative focus of more traditional research methods” (Cuthill & Fien, 2004: 72).

In community visioning consultations there is a reduced risk of attempting multiple aims or asking community participants to discuss their perceptions of several unrelated issues for various planning ends. The aim of a ‘community visioning’ process is to involve citizens in imagining a shared future vision for their city. Community visioning brings together local people to debate and articulate local community values, identify current issues and future opportunities, and collectively develop specific plans to achieve their vision (Ames, 1997). Typically, the process involves tracking emerging trends and issues, exploring alternative futures, charting preferred directions and identifying strategies for action.

‘Visioning’ uses a range of techniques to engage the community, including workshops, surveys, public meetings, community tours, publications and special events. Advocates of ‘community visioning’ processes argue that they provide profound way of defining a region’s sense of place and extrapolate the interplay between people’s issues of place (where we are) to issues of identity (who we are and want to become). Theoretically, a community vision that seeks a balance between a healthy society, environment and economy provides overall guidance for subsequent planning and action (Cuthill, 2004: 429).

Running parallel to the new focus on community are new social transformation models in planning. Approaches like bargaining and communicative theory seem most relevant to state and local government place-based strategies. ‘Bargaining’ means that there is a transaction between two or more parties that establishes roles and an element of give and take that ‘cuts both way’ to determine an outcome (Dorcey, 1986). Hence the planning decision is the product of give and take between active participants in the planning process (Lane, 2005). It recognises the uneven “distribution of power to bargain with but insists that the plural nature of planning situations means that all participants have the capacity to influence decisions” (Lane, 2005: 294-295; McDonald, 1989). For this model, participation of actors is the central ingredient of effective decision-making so in many ways the role of public participation is about gathering information for planners to make appropriate future sustainable directions.

However, bargaining is criticised because it is not underpinned by “any effort at ‘learning about’ the interests and perceptions of the participants and with that knowledge, revising what each participant thinks about each other’s and their own interest” (Healey, 1992: 157). In the communicative theory approach, largely developed from a converging set of ideas from Habermas (1984), Dyrzek (1990) and Giddens’ (1994), there is a sense that the concerns of an individual actor are personally, societally and culturally situated. In relation to communicative planning there is a significant role for community participation in forums for dialogue, argumentation and discourse (Hillier, 1993, Healey, 1996) involving negotiations, bargaining, debating and engagement aimed at organising “attention to the possibilities for action” (Forester, 1989: 19; Dyrzek, 1990; Giddens, 1994; Healey, 1996; Lane, 2005).

Enlisting a range of communities to debate, express and propose future vision options results in a greater possibility of implementation and achievement of the social outcomes and social capacity building goals. Knowing the range of expectations, desires, fears, advantages and difficulties residents who are 'experiencing' the city on a day-to-day basis face can inform local government decision-making processes in new ways. The underlying premise is that communities can be strengthened by having a better relationship with government and better governance will result from a stronger relationship with communities (Considine, 2004). Given the interests of individual actors or community members are often contradictory, competing and varied, the role of participation in planning needs careful assessment of how best to work with such divergent 'voices'. Lane suggests that public participation can only be understood in terms of the decision-making context in which it is embedded (2005: 297). Planning models contribute to determining the level and role of public participation and the decision-making context.

### **The Metropolitan Strategy *Melbourne 2030* – Planning for sustainable growth**

Melbourne is a developed, middle-sized city with many natural environment assets and a rich cultural heritage. Melbourne is the capital city in the state of Victoria (and the second largest Australian city) with a population of 3.2 million residents. It has been voted one of the 'most liveable cities in the world'. Located on the south-east edge of Australia, Melbourne is at the apex of one of the world's largest bays, Port Phillip. Focused around a central business district, Melbourne's 8,800 sq km of suburbs spread more than 40 km to the south, are hemmed in by the picturesque Dandenong ranges 30 km to the east, extend up to 20 km to the north and sprawl across vast, flat basalt plains to the west. The City of Melbourne is made up of the city centre and a number of inner-city suburbs and is 36.3km<sup>2</sup> with an estimated resident population of 65,000 and, in 2004, an estimated 644,705 daytime visitors while the Inner Melbourne Region has a population of 260,000 people.

*The Metropolitan Strategy Melbourne 2030 – Planning for sustainable growth* was released on 8 October 2002 and sets out governments' position on many issues of land use and transport planning. The process ran for three years, cost over \$5 million and involved around 5,500 people (DOI, 2002: 18). The Victorian State Government's Department of Infrastructure developed *Melbourne 2030* as a strategic policy and land-use statement it states: "It will give municipal councils a clear regional context within which to plan and manage local needs, and it will inform communities and individuals about the types of change they might see in their part of metropolitan Melbourne and the surrounding region". *Melbourne 2030's* vision articulates the scope of the priority directions: "In the next 30 years, Melbourne will grow by up to one million people and will consolidate its reputation as one of the most liveable, attractive and prosperous areas in the world for residents, business and visitors". It implies building on its current standing – "consolidate its reputation" – and notes its key values in terms of liveability, attractiveness and prosperity for all.

The metropolitan strategy seeks a more compact city by focusing on an urban growth boundary and concentrating 70 per cent of this expansion in the existing metropolitan area over the time period 2001-2030. *Melbourne 2030* is described by Premier Steve Bracks as "an action plan to ensure the benefits of growth are shared fairly across the State, and in a sustainable way". Minister for Planning, Mary Delahunty, uses more emotional language, calling it "an exciting project because it is about our vision for our city...It is about the sort of city in which we all want to live. *Melbourne 2030*

also looks at access and relationships. It formulates policies to ensure that all people who live and work in metropolitan Melbourne and the surrounding region have fair access to the facilities needed for a healthy, safe and productive life – to quality housing, shops, schools, hospitals and places to work and play – whatever their circumstances and wherever they live.” As, University of Melbourne, Professor Paul Mees points out many academics and planners were very supportive of the plan while the public and media response to the strategy was apathetic in contrast to the volume of participants in the preparation stages (Mees, 2003: 289).

Local government has an important role in shaping and implementing the policies and strategies of *Melbourne 2030*. For example, the councils of Melbourne, Port Phillip, Stonnington and Yarra in association with VicUrban and the State Government initiated the *Making Melbourne More Liveable - Inner Melbourne Action Plan (IMAP)* which is aimed at providing a framework for future growth and development of the inner Melbourne region. ‘Implementation and governance’ in the IMAP document restate the principles of ‘good governance’ and include “the need to embed regional collaboration into the daily work of Local Government and enhance, not duplicate, existing efforts.” IMAP is jointly funded by the *Melbourne 2030* Local Government Assistance funds and the four councils involved.

The community consultation process was conducted by an independent consultant who devised an iterative, three-stage process – Stage 1, ‘All Ears Listening’, focused on public forums, Stage 2 ‘Did we hear you right?’, was to ensure results from stage 1 were correctly interpreted and possibilities for ‘alternative futures’ were to be discussed and Stage 3, ‘Reviewing ‘Our’ Draft Strategy’, was to give the public a chance to assess and test alternative futures prepared in a draft strategy document. Stage 1 included public forums, small group workshops and direct submissions. A community reference group was formed to act as a sounding or advisory board about content and processes for community consultation. However, Stage 3 of the community consultation was abandoned thereby eliminating the main program of scrutinising and testing development options prior to the production of the final strategy. Instead the final strategy was released without being preceded by a draft: “No options or alternative futures were ever discussed or even identified; there was thus no need (or process) for evaluation” (Mees, 2003: 294).

Perhaps even more problematic was that while a community consultation process existed many argued that it was “ignored or overruled” by the Departmental officials “so the resulting strategy proposals are those that would have emerged had there been no technical reports, consultation or reference groups” (Mees, 2003: 295). The most frequent issues raised by the public were public transport and road and traffic congestion with participants being “fairly equally split about how to solve it” – half advocating expansion of roads along with public transport and the other half opposing road expansion (Coombes, 2000: 1). Instead the *Melbourne 2030* strategy involves expending 94 per cent of committed capital on freeway expansion (Mees, 2003: 295). Similarly, the Department of Infrastructure rejected the community reference groups’ advice on a multi-stage process that would integrate the consultants work with the development and evaluation of options and ‘sign-off’ by stakeholders to ensure power-sharing between state government, local councils and the community. It stopped calling meeting in July 2001 (with the reference group meeting only once in the next 14 months).

Critics have concluded that since the participatory, community-partnership approach described in the *Melbourne 2030* strategy document did not occur, real problems of

community acceptance are likely to emerge. Mees reminds us of Arnstein's 'tokenism': "if consulting (citizens) is not combined with other modes of participation, (it) is still a sham, since it offers no assurance that citizen concerns and ideas will be taken into account...participation remains...measured by how many come to meetings, take brochures home, or answer a questionnaire" (Arnstein, 1969: 219, quoted in Mees, 2003: 297). By 2006 several resident action groups rallied together to voice their concerns about the focus on freeways in the transport strategy and pro-developer high-density housing outside preferred locations.

### **Imagining Hobart 2025**

Further south is Hobart – the capital city in the island of Tasmania. Hobart is the business and government centre for Tasmania with a high concentration of public and community services and infrastructure and extensive natural beauty in bush, parkland, rivers and beaches. The city is bounded by the Derwent River to the east and by Mt Wellington to the west. At the time of the 2001 Census, 47,319 persons were counted within the Hobart City Council LGA which covers an area of some 77.8 square km. Hobart sits within the Greater Hobart Area which is the tenth largest urban centre in Australia. In 2001 the population of Greater Hobart was 191,169 or 41% of the State's total (ABS Census 2001). The Greater Hobart statistical area covers five Local Government Areas (LGA).

*Hobart 2025* is an example of a city strategy still being formulated, having completed community consultations in June 2006. *Hobart 2025* vision will be used to inform strategic plans and long-term infrastructure and service planning in order to meet the communities collective vision. The impetus for the 2025 vision centred on a "combination of needing a longer planning time horizon, a broader policy context of a community wanting greater input into local governance, engagement and the building of social capital and to a lesser extent meeting statutory requirements to develop regular strategic plans" (Short, 2006: 5).

A core group of council senior managers in community, strategic and executive services and the General Manager formed the reference group or Council Management Team (CMT) for the *2025* visioning project which employed an independent facilitator at the development stage of the project. Initially there were interviews with major stakeholders in the city including 13 key stakeholders ranging from government agencies and the *Tasmania Together* Board, the University and other leading education, artistic and scientific organisations, to the Tasmanian Council of Social Services, Tasmanian Aboriginal Centre, Tasmanian Council of Commerce and Industry, Port and Waterfront Authorities and the Tasmanian Property Council.

Stakeholder identification in the Hobart community visioning process is described in council documents as being inclusive and open to all citizens wishing to participate and specific groups. The website wording and supplement survey form, that was sent to all residents in the Hobart City Council area, stated that people were "invited to complete the attached form and post it back to the council. If you love Hobart, care about its future and want to contribute – act now." The process was described as one that needed "the full involvement of the community." A press release from the Lord Mayor was used to outline the timeframe of the community consultation process (primarily made up of 9 community engagement workshops) and the rationale for those invited especially the attempt to invite a stratified sample of residents from each suburb in the city.

In terms of communications and participation planning, Hobart City Council drafted a flowchart based on the envisaged communication participation process. Communication stages included invitations for interviews with major stakeholders in the city, survey form and separate supplement in the council's quarterly newsletter, new website page on the Council website with email back comments action, press release from Lord Mayor announcing the project, written invitations to suburban community members to attend workshops, invitations to other peak organisations inviting them to participate through a number of options including written submissions, public notices in newspapers, interviews on community and public radio stations and letters to the editor in Hobart's main newspaper.

Community commitment to the visioning process seems ambiguous. Over 600 people were invited to participate and only 250 people attended the community visioning workshop but high response rates were achieved for the returned mail survey forms, and website comment forms (over 650 replies) and submissions (300 individuals and organisations). Alongside the community visioning project the first stage of a social plan was undertaken. It involved a literature search of existing social, environmental and economic reports and a community profile largely based on census data with a detailed audit of community organisations and services. While separate youth and children workshops were conducted (with links to 17 schools), there was limited incorporation of other 'target' populations. Separate participatory processes could have been held for a number of hard to reach populations or those who anecdotal and survey information suggest were unlikely to become involved. Explicit support for other 'invisible citizens' and groups, like indigenous, people with a disability or literacy/language difficulties, is needed to limit the effects and perpetuation of existing societal power structures where the educated, most articulate or wealthy are usually the main participants in traditional 'consultation' processes.

As the attendance to community visioning workshops was smaller than expected Hobart City Council needed to adopt less formal methods of consultation. Using the existing networks and connections they have with a range of community service providers, Council was able to work alongside services to collect some data from residents who they suspected had not participated (e.g. unemployed men, carers of disabled parents/partners or children). The other main principle was to 'go to where the people are' – this included running a stall at the Saturday Salamanca markets, having a visible presence at charity or fundraising community events and paying for fishing trips, a street party and an outdoor film festival while asking people for their perspectives in a relaxed atmosphere. These types of methods were an addendum to the original program of consultation and ultimately was the only cost-effective way Council used to collect data from more 'hard to reach' populations.

Initially there was no formal plan on how the information gathered at the workshops would be reported back to the community and after the success of the survey supplement it was decided to run a special edition in the *Capital City News* of the findings. Unfortunately this seems a very traditional potentially isolating way to communicate to a cross section of the community. Council acknowledged that there was no formal mechanism for feedback from participants and, as such, it is difficult to judge how the 2025 process has or will assist in community engagement. Designing community participation processes that incorporate multiple innovative ways to identify and meet with residents and stakeholders are yet to have become common practice in many local and regional governments visioning processes.

### **Defining hard to reach populations**

Engaging a cross section of citizens and giving them a fair 'say' in the future direction of the city inevitably involves a number of significant logistical challenges and potentially requires structural and administrative changes and staff training and development (Brannan *et al*, 2006). Historically, local government has been structured around responsibilities for outputs and functions and not outcomes (Mant, 2002). Recently, effected by a neo-liberal emphasis and the need to consider sustainable development and delivery of services, convention structures have been challenged to develop coordinated mechanisms that enable network and multiple policy actions (Gillen, 2004) and to ensure representative, effective and accountable participation in decision-making (Edwards, 2002).

All local government agencies realise that there are groups of people who are not represented in council decision-making processes, or who cannot or do not respond to consultation and engagement strategies for a range of reasons. Social and economic disadvantage impact on an individuals' likelihood of contributing to formal consultation processes. Individuals or groups whom institutions define as difficult to contact or engage fall into this 'hard to reach' category. This group often possesses various characteristics that may affect participation due to either difference and disadvantage or barriers (e.g. those with restricted mobility or disabilities, indigenous people, elderly, young people, culturally and linguistically diverse communities, homeless people, gay community, refugees and asylum seekers, people in care, drug/substance misusers). The VLGA notes that many local governments have held consultation processes with confined groups only and struggled to develop consultation approaches that encourage participation beyond 'the usual suspects'.

But the real problem for councils is a combination of disadvantage and disengagement. Healthy, well-resourced people and households can also be difficult to contact, consult or engage. While not strictly civically apathetic, they may lack the time or the motivation to respond to invitations to information or consultation workshops and engagement processes at the local government level (Brackertz, N, et al 2005). Similarly, taking up opportunities for participation in the local community may be difficult for people who work long hours or shift work and those with significant work and family responsibilities. In these situations direct and immediate implications relating to people's lifestyle and core values need to be communicated to residents as a motivator to attend. Other groups may face barriers related to access to public transport or child care for the duration of the consultation period. Additionally, communities may simply appear to be hard to reach because consulting authorities have not yet sought their involvement in an appropriate manner (Cook, 2002).

### **Final thoughts**

For political equality in participation to be enhanced community consultation processes must be open and accessible across levels of 'representativeness' from geographic areas, socio-economic groups, political views, and demographic dimensions. The demographic dimension is regarded as the most challenging of these. Making the process representative involves goes beyond inviting all ethnic, socio-economic, age-related and other groups to take part "but ensuring that they do so, despite the fact that some are difficult to involve and may be disengaged from the political processes" (Brackertz, N., *et al*, 2005: 16).

Local council and government websites for *Melbourne 2030* and *Hobart 2025* highlight a reorientation towards discourses of democratic governance by advocating

that citizen participation is a fundamental tenet of modern sustainable communities facing issues of urban growth management. The consultation documents of *Melbourne 2030* and *Hobart 2025* share the common understanding of consultation as a two-way process *before* decision-making outlining processes aimed towards generating a sense of community ownership of the final strategies or priorities. These visioning exercises could have benefited from greater coordinated attention being paid to intermediaries who can directly assist in bridging the gap between government and citizens. Involving services whose core business is to work with 'hard to reach' populations could have opened up spaces for greater dialogue with people who usually don't participate on their terms and in meaningful ways for them.

Recently the Victorian and Tasmanian state and local governments have experimented with ways to engage the public in decision-making resulting in a slight shift towards more qualitative, deliberative methods (Hajer and Wagenaar, 2003). More traditional 'consultation' methods like surveys, focus groups, public meetings, policy submissions, comment forms and stakeholder reference groups still dominant government thinking on how to engage communities. Future options point to how traditional methods can still be used and augmented by new methodologies (like informal events and smaller meetings with target or hard to reach populations on 'their territory') with opportunities for direct interaction between citizens, policy-makers and politicians (Wiseman, 2005: 6).

Strengths of these new forms of participation in influencing public policy decision-making are based on their 'public judgement' component which creates a space for "informed and respectful dialogue between citizens from diverse starting points" rather than on the "basis of manipulating and massaging public opinion" (Wiseman, 2005: 13). However, in the case of *Melbourne 2030* it seems the public's concerns were not always taken into consideration and acted upon. In Hobart, community engagement workshops that invited a combination of selected and random participants had limited success in comparison to more traditional methods like paper surveys or more directed programs of informal participation.

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