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Community Engagement in Local Government Reform in Queensland

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Abstract: Australian local government has been subjected to vigorous reform by state governments for more than a decade, with the most recent reform episode presently under way in Queensland under the Size, Shape and Sustainability program. Reform has typically focused on enhancing the operational efficiency of local government, with scant consideration accorded to local democracy. Accordingly, this paper examines the role of community engagement in local government reform in Queensland, both as a means of retaining the vibrancy of local democracy and as a method of improving the efficacy of reform itself by drawing upon local knowledge through engagement with local communities.

Keywords: Community engagement; local democracy; local government reform.

Note:

The views expressed in this paper represent the authors' views and not the views of the Redcliffe City Council.

Introduction

In almost all state and territory jurisdictions, Australian local government has been subjected to intense reform for the past two decades. While the nature and degree of reform initiatives have varied between the different state and territory jurisdictions, all reform episodes share a common focus on improving the operational efficiency of local councils, often through structural change in the form of the blunt instrument of compulsory amalgamation (Vince 1997).

While considerable controversy surrounds the view that 'bigger is better' in local government in terms of economic efficiency (see, for example, Dollery and Crase 2004), very little attention has been paid to the role of local democracy in local government reform. In order to remedy this neglect, this paper considers the role of community engagement in local government reform, using the present *Size, Shape and Sustainability* program in Queensland local government as an illustrative example. For the purposes of this article, the term 'community' simply refers to the residents of a defined local government area.

The paper itself is divided into six main parts. Section 2 considers various approaches to conceptualizing local democracy and local community engagement, especially the Aulich (1999) model. Section 3 provides a synoptic description of past local government reform and community engagement in Australia. Section 4 examines the Queensland's *Size, Shape and Sustainability* project as a contemporary example of community engagement in Australian local government reform in which a number of 'best-practice' principles for community engagement activities in local government reform processes are identified. Section 5 offers some critical comments on the *Size, Shape and Sustainability* program. The paper ends with some brief concluding remarks in section 6.

Models of Local Government and Community Engagement

Prior to examining in more detail the potential role of community engagement activities state-imposed local government reform processes, as exemplified by the *Size, Shape and Sustainability* program in Queensland local government, various theoretical questions are considered. This can be achieved in relatively simple terms in the first instance by understanding local government reform as a public policy process. An alternative and more sophisticated view can be derived from Aulich's (1999) two generic models of local governance.

In essence, local government reform is an example of public policy. The term 'public policy' is difficult to define with any degree of precision and many different definitions have been developed over time (Bridgman and Davis 2004, 3). In general terms, public policy can be defined as decisions or intentions of a given government to act or not act in response to a particular public issue or problem, and the subsequent outcomes of those decisions or intentions. However, public policy is more that just a statement of intent. Anderson (2003, 2) argued that the concept of public policy also includes an action component describing the intentional actions of a government in response to an issue or problem.

The public policy cycle approach has been developed to act as a tool to better understand the complexities of policy making. This approach views policy making as a series of steps, including issue identification, policy analysis, policy instruments, consultation, coordination, decision, implementation and evaluation (Bridgman and Davis 2004, 26).

Although sometimes criticised as an over-simplification of the policy making process, in this context this conceptualization of the process shows how community engagement can play an important role in developing public policy. Bridgman and Davis (2004, 78) contend that 'a consultative process offers policy makers a way to structure debate, and to develop a solution more likely to 'stick' because it reflects the realities of the problem and the competing

interests of those involved'. It can therefore be argued that when considering the most appropriate type of local government reform, consultation processes, including community engagement activities, have the potential to improve the overall quality and effectiveness of the reforms developed and implemented.

However, the OECD (1994, 6-9) has argued that the consultation processes can also be used 'to build consensus and political support' and to 'carry out strategic agendas'. Community engagement activities may thus also be employed by state and territory governments in local government reform processes to gain support from local communities for a particular course of action.

Local government reform provides a salient example of local and state governments jointly formulating public policy. A state government determines a view of local government reform processes and then local governments respond to this agenda with their own position on the issue. In some cases, each tier of government undertakes these policy making tasks cooperatively and/or in consultation with each other, as may be the case with the *Size, Shape and Sustainability* project currently underway in Queensland. In other instances, local government reform agendas are simply imposed on local government, perhaps most notably by the Kennett government in Victoria in the 1990s.

Opportunities exist in this context for local governments to use community engagement activities to support their own views on local government reform. An obvious example would be a local government using community engagement activities to rally community support in opposition to a particular type of reform being imposed, such as forced amalgamation with a neighbouring local government area. These basic insights into community engagement activities can be analysed in more depth using theoretical frameworks of public policy making at the macro-level, such as public choice theory, to allow for a more comprehensive understanding of community engagement in the policy making process.

Public choice theory is based on the *homo economicus* postulate that politicians are motivated by their own interest as opposed to the general welfare of society when formulating public policy (Anderson 2003, 20). Using public choice theory, it can be argued that politicians employ government processes, like community engagement activities, to pursue their own agenda as opposed to the 'common good' (Dollery and Wallis 2001, 44). Community engagement activities then have the potential to become unwitting political tools in the public policy making process.

The role of community engagement activities in the political process can also be understood by considering the relationship between participatory democracy and representative democracy. Kane and Bishop (2002, 93) articulate a fundamental role of community engagement activities in the Australian system of government by observing that 'consultative practices … should not be looked on as a form of direct democracy but as a means of improving representative government'. This means that, regardless of their motives, it is politicians who ultimately determine the nature of local government reform. Accordingly, the fundamental purpose of community engagement activities in this context is to assist and inform the decision-making process of the elected officials. The types of community engagement activities politicians choose to employ and who they involve in the process will clearly significantly affect the nature of the information collected.

Aulich (1999, 19) has argued that local government 'plays a significant role in two respects' as part of the Australian federal system of government. The first role relates to the concept of democracy: Local governments give 'voice to local aspirations for decentralised government'. Local governments, by virtue of their proximity to local communities, seem to be more responsive to the needs of the communities they represent. In this regard, Caulfield (2003, 16) notes that 'because local government is closest to its citizens, it is in the best position to represent their interests'.

In the Aulich (1999, 19) typology, the second role of local government is to provide 'a mechanism for efficient delivery of services to local communities'. Aulich (1999) has developed two models of local government; the 'local democracy model' and the 'structural efficiency model'. It is argued that a role for community engagement activities in local government reform is more consistent with the understanding of local government developed by the local democracy model as opposed to the structural efficiency model.

Local democracy model

Aulich (1999, 19) describes the local democracy model as 'putting democratic and locality values above efficiency values'. This model 'values local differences and system diversity because a council has both the capacity for local choice and local voice'.

Although the model promotes diversity amongst local governments, the common underlying democratic principles of responsiveness, representativeness, access and accountability are emphasised. These underlying democratic principles are discussed in more detail below, with particular reference to the Australian local government context and how they relate to community engagement activities.

A *responsive* government is aware of a community's needs and expectations, and acts accordingly to meet these needs and to fulfill expectations. It is from the democratic principle of responsiveness that the concept of fiscal federalism can be applied to the local government environment. A key notion of fiscal federalism is 'a decentralization of expenditure functions within a multi – level system of government can generate substantial efficiency gains and enhance equity outcomes' (Dollery and Wallis 2001, 11). As opposed to a central or higher level of government providing all public goods and services, local government is the most appropriate level for providing particular local goods and services. These 'efficiency gains and equity outcomes' are based on the correspondence principle which states 'the jurisdiction that determines the level of provision of the public good is precisely the set of individuals who

consume the good' (Oates 1972, 34). This means that a public good or service should be provided by the level of government closest to the people who will use the public good or service.

This is because the government closest to the people will be in the best position to respond efficiently and equitably to the demand for public goods and services (Dollery and Wallis 2001). A local government plays a key role in promoting the democratic principle of responsiveness through the provision of public goods and services that directly benefit people within a local government area, such as local roads, waste collection, town planning services and the provision of parks and open space.

It is evident that reform processes that value responsiveness could involve community engagement activities. Local governments are particularly well-placed by virtue of their close proximity to a local community to engage in discussion with local people about how to improve the responsiveness of public goods and services. Alternatively, community members might also be able to identify how reform processes would adversely affect the responsiveness of public goods and services.

Winston (1997, 2:7) describes representative democracy as 'directed at public interest as perceived by the elected member. The elected members' credibility is dependant upon being seen as a true refection of community opinion'. He goes on to contend that the 'representative role' of elected members consists of being 'actively aware of the needs and expectations of his/her constituents, in order to bring an informed view to council deliberations'.

One of the contentious contemporary local issues affecting Australian local governments in relation to *representativeness* is structural reform involving amalgamation. It has been suggested that the amalgamation of smaller councils into larger councils would provide considerable economic benefits by improving the efficiency and effectiveness of local governments. For example, a larger council would be able to benefit from 'economies of scale stemming

from larger size that facilitates the efficient provision of services' (May 2003, 79).

By contrast, the larger a local government area becomes, the more distant elected members are from their constituents. It can thus be argued that the quality of representative democracy provided by local governments is reduced (Dollery 1997, 449). This could be due to the fact that elected members of larger councils are expected to represent a greater number of people across a wider area. This would reduce elected members' ability to remain in touch with the needs and expectations of their constituents. People may also find it more difficult to access elected members of larger councils in order to raise issues or discuss their concerns. It is important to note that contradictory evidence exists in relation to these impacts of amalgamation (May 2003, 85-96).

Using the local democracy model, it can be argued that any reform process in local government that has the potential to affect the quality and nature of local representation should involve community engagement activities. This would provide an opportunity to understand how the reform process would impact of on representiveness by seeking the views of constituents.

Access and accountability of local government as part of the democratic process can be understood using the concept of participation. Dollery (2005, 2:2) holds that participation 'is the principal means of granting and withdrawing consent as well as holding those who govern accountable for their actions'. People are able to access local governments and hold elected members accountable for their actions by participating in a variety of passive or active ways. Dollery (2005, 2:3) further contends that passive participation includes 'exercising their franchise, soliciting information and, at the most, discussing and proselytising'. It is suggested that most people approach participation in local government in this more passive way 'by limiting their involvement to voting during local elections'.

Sills (1968, 252) argues that a more active participant will 'attend meetings of local councils or its committees, communicate with representatives, perform jury functions, formally enrol in a party (where parties exist), canvass and register voters, and compete for public offices'. People also participate in the democratic process in local government as part of an interest group.

These groups lobby local governments and attempt to influence decisions and/or government policy. Not only do these groups promote the interest of their members or advocate for a particular cause, but they also hold local governments accountable in relation to decisions made, and the impact of decisions on their particular cause or constituency.

In addition to this form of participation in the political processes of local government, access and accountability can also be understood in broader terms to include the level of participation people have in the processes of local government. Not only do people have access to local government through their elected members and the process of voting, but people can also hold local government accountable through 'different dimensions of community involvement: public relations, community consultation and people's participation' (Floyd and Palmer 1985, 97).

Community involvement via public relations activities provides information to the community about the activities and decisions of local government. Public relations tools used include annual reports, newsletters, pamphlets and newspaper notices. Such activities assist in making local government more transparent and more accountable. Community consultation activities, such as community forums, public meetings and community surveys, provide an opportunity for people to provide information to the council and engage in discussion and debate in relation to particular issues.
People's participation is the process by which councils delegate various responsibilities to committees made up of community representatives. Given the prominent role of participation in ensuring access and accountability in local government, it would be expected any reform process that considers

access and accountability important should involve community engagement activities because such activities by their very nature would promote access and accountability as part of the reform process.

Efficiency model

In contrast to the local democracy model, the structural efficiency model 'emphasises the importance of efficient distribution of services to local communities' (Aulich 1999, 19). Using this model, local governments are viewed as 'a supplier of goods and services' and 'fiscal and economic issues override other social and political concerns' (Aulich 1999, 19). This approach incorporates greater involvement and control of state government in the affairs of local government, and focuses more on the efficiency of operations, thus reducing an emphasis on democratic principles.

It might be expected that community engagement activities would play a much lesser role in reform processes aimed at improving the operational efficiencies of local government.

Aulich (1999, 19) argues that this occurs because this model of local government does not emphasise the democratic principles discussed above that would naturally involve seeking the views and opinions of local people. Reform processes using this model would focus on bureaucrats developing and implementing economic, financial and organisational strategies to improve efficiencies in the delivery of public services within the context of local government.

From the discussion so far, it can be argued that community engagement activities seem most appropriate in reform processes that are based on the values associated with the local democracy model of local government. This conclusion can be extended to include the notion that reform processes that affect the responsiveness, representativeness, access and accountability of local governments should involve community engagement activities.

Australian Local Government Reform and Community Engagement

In the late 1980s, the modern reform process began in Australian local government. Local governments were required to become more efficient by employing strategies such as 'resource sharing, competitive tendering and contracting, increasing market influences on pricing of their goods and services, municipal amalgamation and updating technology to facilitate delivery [of goods and services]' (Aulich 1999, 13).

These reforms were also concerned about clarifying and improving the governance role of local government 'to ensure that councils are more accountable and responsive to the community they serve' (Aulich 1999, 13). During this phase of reform community engagement activities were part of the process in each of the states.

The next phase of reform was focused on the achievement of economic efficiency through the implementation of National Competition Policy which began in 1995 at the federal and state level. This policy was based on the 'use of competition to achieve efficiency' rather than 'government regulation of the economy' and state governments were given 'discretion to decide how various elements would be applied to local government' (Baker 2003, 133).

Aulich (1999) argues that New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia state governments implemented these reforms with some respect for the values espoused in the local democracy model. However, Aulich (1999, 17) contends that in Victoria and South Australia 'economic efficiency supplanted local democracy as a key value'. Aulich (1999, 18) holds that those states that subscribed to the values of the local democracy model still had 'a preference for using consultative mechanisms [including] discussion papers, exposure drafts of legislation, inquiries, seminars [and] community consultations'.

In the other states, this period of reform was described as a more 'technocratic process that permitted little effective consultation and less collaboration with stakeholders' (Aulich 1999, 17).

These reforms also emphasised managerialism. Managerialism may be described as introducing a range of generic management functions into local government operations including the employment of senior professional managers, introduction of various management functions such as strategic planning, program management, monitoring and evaluation and an increased focus on accountability, performance, outcomes and client focused service delivery (Ryan 1997, 158-159).

These economic reforms of local government also involved a reduction in government expenditure, privatisation, corporatisation and commercialisation of local government goods and services and an increased emphasis on cost and quality of outputs (Ryan 1997, 58). Dollery (2005, 2:12) observes that 'the emphasis on economic goals in state reform programs has aroused concern in some quarters that the traditional democratic features of council activity are being subsumed'. Some of these concerns centred on local government amalgamations which formed a key part of local government economic reform in some states.

Amalgamation represents structural reform in local government. Examples of a number of other possible models for structural reform that may achieve economic efficiencies whilst preserving local democracy have been documented including 'ad hoc resource-sharing models, regional organisations of councils (ROCs), area integration or joint board models, virtual local governments and agency models' (Dollery, Crase and Johnson 2006, 127-134).

The managerial and economic reforms appear to focus more on the mechanics of local government as described using the structural efficiency model. Community engagement activities in these types of reforms processes

do not appear appropriate for a number of reasons. For example, it can be argued that local communities would have limited interest and expertise in the kinds of issues to be considered such as the development of new business models and management processes and would therefore not be considered direct stakeholders in these types of reforms. However, it is important to note that constituents still have a vested interest in these types of reforms as the intended outcome is improved quality of local government goods and services at a reduced cost.

Queensland's Size, Shape and Sustainability Program

In 2004, the Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) resolved to consider the pressures confronting councils in Queensland and to explore the need for local government reform to ensure the long-run viability of local councils. As a consequence of this decision, a Discussion Paper entitled *Size, Shape and Sustainability of Queensland Local Government* was released on 3rd March 2005 and a Special Conference of the LGAQ held in Brisbane in early June 2005, which formulated a Communique approving a 'comprehensive reform blueprint'. A 'ten point Action Plan' followed from the Communique that was subsequently endorsed by both the LGAQ Executive and the Queensland Minister for Local Government and Planning. The Action Plan provided for a local government reform program embodying the *Size, Shape and Sustainability* (SSS) Review Framework, sustainability indicators, 'options for change', 'Independent Review Facilitators' (IRF), and funding arrangements for state government support. The reform program itself is outlined in the *Size, Shape and Sustainability: Guidelines Kit* (LGAQ 2006a). The SSS project in Queensland may be considered a salient Australian example of how relevant community engagement can be to a reform process that is based on local democracy model of local government.

The SSS program is an initiative of the LGAQ that enables local government in Queensland to proactively 'investigate and reform its structural arrangements identifying this as essential to its long term sustainability'

(LGAQ 2006a, 1). The aims of the project have been described as follows (LGAQ 2006a, 1:4):

> 'SSS provides an opportunity for council's to examine their:
> 1. Size and geographic dimensions;
> 2. Management, organisation and operational arrangements;
> 3. Financial and accountability arrangements; and
> 4. Service delivery mechanisms including contracting out and joint arrangements including, enterprises and resource sharing'.

The options available to Queensland local governments for change through this process identified by the LGAQ include:
1. 'Resource sharing through service agreements;
2. Resource sharing through joint enterprise;
3. Significant boundary changes; and
4. Merger/amalgamation' (LGAQ 2006a, 1:7).

In practice, the project is based on groups of neighbouring local government areas throughout Queensland employing an 'independent facilitator' from a pool of LGAQ-selected consultants to oversee the process.

Each local council is required to assess its future 'sustainability' using a number of sustainability indicators whilst following a predetermined project methodology known as the 'review framework'. Community engagement features strongly throughout this review framework. Table 1 provides a summary of the framework.

Table 1: SSS Review Framework

Stages in the SSS Review Framework	Description
Preliminary Review Phase	'Councils consider their involvement in SSS review and identify possible partners'.
Initial Review Phase	'Undertake sustainability assessment and initiate community engagement'.
	'Confirm the key issues, all options for change and SSS review partners'.
Comprehensive Review Phase	'Undertake information gathering, research and analysis on all options for change'.
	'Seek community response'.
	'Consider final report and determine implementation strategies'.
Review Implementation Phase	'Implement identified strategies'.

Source: LGAQ 2006a, 2-5.

The community engagement aspect of this methodology seems to have been thoroughly developed and the LGAQ appear have provided local councils with a solid framework for planning and delivering community engagement activities. A number of best-practice principles in community engagement as part of local government reform processes can be identified in the SSS program. For example, community engagement activities should be clearly defined as part of any reform process and there are many different definitions used to define these types of activities. The LGAQ (2003, 5) defines community engagement as 'an open, accountable process through which individuals exchange views and influence policy or decision making'. The key components of this definition are considered below.

Community engagement must always be open and accountable. This means that when the local governments conduct consultation activities they must be properly planned, efficiently and effectively implemented, and formally evaluated. Community engagement involves a process of people exchanging views. For example, community engagement is not typically understood as simply providing information to a community about reform processes or the subsequent planned changes to local government service delivery.

Community engagement activities provide an opportunity for community members to enter into discussions with the local governments in order to influence the planning and delivery of their services and programs where appropriate. It provides an opportunity for the local governments to gather to the opinions of the local community in relation to a wide range of issues.

Community engagement provides opportunity for the community to influence the policy and decision making of local councils. Community engagement activities must be meaningful in that outcomes from these activities need to be seriously considered by a local government when preparing policy and making decisions. Accordingly, in the context of local government reform processes, community engagement activities should not be used if the reform agenda has already been set by the state government.

Should this be the case, then local residents should simply be informed of the decisions that have been made and be given the opportunity to provide feedback to the government on these decisions. Local communities should thus not be led to believe they can influence the outcome of a reform process if in reality this is not the case. A number of best-practice principles in community engagement can be identified as part of the SSS project. The most important of these are now considered in more detail.

Application of the IAP2 public participation spectrum
The SSS project uses the International Association for Public Participation (IAP2) participation spectrum to assist local governments to determine what

kind community engagement activities are appropriate for each stage in the review process (LGAQ 2006a, 8:10-11). Table 2 contains the main elements of this system. Using the IAP2 spectrum can be useful in determining the purpose of any community engagement activities planned.

Table 2: The IAP2 Public Participation Spectrum

Level of Community Consultation	Description
Inform	'To provide the public with balanced and objective information to assist them in understanding the problem, alternatives, opportunities and/or solutions'.
Consult	'To obtain public feedback on analysis, alternatives and/or decisions'.
Involve	'To work directly with the public throughout the process to ensure that public concerns and aspirations are consistently understood and considered'.
Collaborate	'To partner with the public in each aspect of the decision including the development of alternatives and the identification of the preferred solution'.
Empower	'To place final decision making in the hand of the public'.

Source: IAP2 2006.

For example, the LGAQ observe that in the 'Initial Review Phase' it may only be appropriate to *inform* the community about the reform process. However, when options for reform are being considered in detail through the 'Comprehensive Review Phase', the LGAQ suggests that to *consult/involve* the community may be appropriate (LGAQ 2006a, 8 &14).

This is a very important step in identifying the role for community engagement activities in local government reform because 'best-practice community engagement is objectives driven, not techniques driven' (LGAQ 2006a, 8 & 12).

Develop a community engagement plan

A community engagement plan provides a link between the aim of community engagement activities and the techniques actually used. Whilst the plan should clearly articulate the objectives of the community engagement process, it should also demonstrate which techniques best achieve these objectives. For example, if a large urban local council wanted to engage a significant number of local residents about their views on amalgamation, this may be best achieved through a written or online survey accessible to all residents, as opposed to a public meeting, which has the potential to become unruly and dominated by a few outspoken people. On the other hand, if the local government wanted to debate this issue amongst community leaders representing different people groups within the city, then the formation of a 'reference group' may be the best approach.

Any community engagement plan should also be sensitive to information about a local community that may be relevant to the success of the community engagement activities. For example, the community engagement plan must strategically identify who in the community should be consulted and how this engagement is best achieved.

The answers to these questions will vary from community to community. In a rural community, engaging local business leaders effectively will require a different and possibly more informal process than if the same objective was to be achieved in an urban local government setting. In an urban local government environment, a formal approach may need to be made to the local chamber of commerce in the first instance to achieve the best outcome. The LGAQ (2006a, 8 & 13) also identified a need to adopt a 'basic media/communications protocol to support the community engagement plan'.

Questions to consider in developing such a protocol include the development of media releases, an advertising campaign for the community engagement activities and a strategy for dealing with media enquiries.

Critical Appraisal

At least five main objections can be raised against the *SSS* program. Each of these is considered in turn.

Local council self-interest may thwart SSS project

An important problem facing all forms of collaborative reform in local government, including the *SSS* program, can be reduced to the following question: Can local governments and communities participate in the *SSS* program without being significantly affected by their own vested interests or local parochialism?

Put differently, can councils and their communities see the 'bigger picture' relating to sustainability of all local authorities in a given region? If a particular local council wishes to thwart any regional cooperation initiatives and effectively 'go it alone', then it can comparatively easily 'drag the chain' in terms of the *SSS* guidelines through various stalling tactics. If this is done, then it will force the hand of the Queensland government. In cases of this kind, the Queensland government may feel obliged to force the council in question to undertake reform against its will, thereby removing any voluntary element and undermining community engagement. The state government could thus be placed in the invidious position of over-riding local opinion in favour of some perceived larger regional 'common good'.

The SSS project may be perceived as a 'token exercise'

An alternate and perhaps more cynical view of *SSS* program may question how committed the state government is to the stated methodology of the *SSS* program. Since individual councils are effectively 'creatures of the state legislation', and thus are legally powerless to resist change, the SSS program

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could be seen as a 'token exercise' or 'stalking horse' camouflaging a particular state government agenda on local government reform?

For example, in a response to an recent enquiry by the LGAQ on 'forced amalgamations', the new Queensland Minister for Local Government, Planning and Sport responded by observing that 'for councils not participating in *SSS* or that are not implementing a sustainable solution from the *SSS* process … I do not rule out any policy or legislative instrument' (LGAQ 2006b). Does this imply that the new Minister is simply not ruling out any options, or does it suggest forced amalgamations may become a reality for some councils in future?

State government could use councils to impose its reform agenda

A third possibility is that councils are unwittingly being are 'used' in the *SSS* process to conduct all the necessary investigations, undertake all the thorny community engagement and public relations activities, and then attempt to make all the difficult decisions for the state government on local government reform. Put differently, if a given council were to establish that, on present trends, it was financially unsustainable, then this would present the state government with a 'golden opportunity' to impose forced amalgamation or some other unpalatable reform measure. It could simply argue that the council itself has demonstrated its own unsustainability, but refused to take the necessary remedial measures, thus obliging the state government to intervene. An alternative plausible scenario could consider that should councils fail to achieve outcomes cooperatively, the state government could use this situation as a reason to impose its own agenda.

Accordingly, whereas the lack of direct involvement by the state government in the *SSS* process may represent an attempt to generate 'ownership' of the process amongst local authorities, engender greater participation, and promote ideals of autonomy and self-determination within the local sector, the state government could become more involved in the process as it will ultimately make the decisions about local government reform. In other words,

should *SSS* program be seen as a 'top-down' state government 'owned' process or a 'bottom-up' local government process?

The SSS project does not address conflict between councils

SSS has a methodology based on the proposition that councils will cooperate and be able to achieve agreement on consensual reform options. However, in circumstances where there are conflicts of interests between councils within a group, which interests will prevail, who will make this determination and how will it be made? Will it simply be based on the sustainability assessments or will political factors also affect the final decision? Furthermore, if councils in a particular group are unable to reach agreement on both the methods and aims of reform, although reform has been deemed necessary following *SSS* guidelines, how will disagreement be tackled?

The SSS program ignores the possibility of uneven community engagement

The standard and value of outcomes from the community engagement activities may vary considerably between individual councils and have the potential to adversely affect the *SSS* project. Considerable diversity may exist in the value of the community engagement aspects of *SSS* program across the state. Although the LGAQ has provided a well-developed framework for these activities, the role of community engagement in the *SSS* will vary from region to region. Various factors can account for these likely differences: The type and level of community engagement undertaken; the skills and approach of the facilitator employed; the role assumed by elected representatives in community engagement activities and their relationship with constituents; variations in 'community of interest'; participation rates in the community engagement activities; the role of interest groups and lobby groups; techniques chosen; information provided to the community about the *SSS* program; how this information is presented; the capacity of the community to understand this information; and the complexities of the reform options being considered. An appreciation of the reform process and 'best' reform outcome may also be limited in this process because of some or all of these variables.

In addition, what happens if the outcomes of the community engagement processes do not support the reform option being suggested or if one community is supportive whilst another is opposed to the reforms suggested? How these issues are dealt with will demonstrate how relevant community opinion is to the *SSS* process.

Concluding Remarks

This paper has explored the role of community engagement activities in local government reform in Australia from a range of both theoretical and practical perspectives. This discussion highlighted the different ways in which of community engagement activities have actually been used in local government reform activities. From this information a number of best-practice principles for community engagement activities in local government reform were then developed and applied to the Queensland *SSS* program. It would appear that the *SSS* program represents an excellent example of how best to embody community engagement in local government reform, at least in principle. However, at least five potential problems are envisaged. Needless to add, whether or not actual community engagement in Queensland adheres to these principles remains to be seen.

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