

Victorian Landcare Council

Briefing Note 7

Policy



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Landcare is an organiser of community action

Landcare and government programs are different ways of organising action. Community Landcare is first and foremost about meeting local community goals, and has never just been about meeting government goals. Landcare has a distinctive way of working in community; Landcare uses voluntary commitment within relationships of mutual responsibility; Government programs purchase service delivery within contractual relationships.

Despite the oft-repeated aspiration to engage the community, the dominant natural resource management (NRM) policy is no longer *community participation* but *targeted investment*. The Australian Government has turned away from resourcing broad community participation, to the point where the Caring For Our Country Program can claim building capacity of landholders and communities as one of its core objectives, without funding projects to build community capacity. Mainstream NRM investment is now driven strongly by State and national government priorities for the biophysical environment.

In Victoria, we are in the happy situation of having strong support at ministerial level for community action. Catchment Management Authorities (CMAs) in Victoria (and more recently Australia-wide) have affirmed their commitment to work with Landcare to engage effectively with communities. However, the bulk of government NRM investment is organised around biophysical priorities, established by technical specialists within government programs. CMAs are caught between demands from funders for technical rigour and accountability, on the one hand, and prospect of the resource-intensive consultation that is needed to give local communities a say in priorities and programs.

In NRM, as in many other policy issues, governments want the volunteer effort communities can mobilise, but are much less interested in understanding *how communities organise themselves*. After a decade of fieldwork with regional development programs, Robyn Eversole has concluded that community engagement has become "a government-led process carried out primarily on governments' institutional terrain."¹ Local communities, observes Eversole, have their own ways of working out what's important to them and organising action to improve their situation, but this remains *invisible* to government programs, which are organised through a formal structure like boards, management committees, funding programs and project management. When government programs and their staff treat bureaucratic forms of decision making and accountability as a blueprint for effective *community* action, they miss what community action is all about.

"*They just don't get it!*" say Landcare staff, as they complain about the latest failure to consult. What they mean is that government programs don't seem to understand community action. The individuals, families, networks and businesses that live and work in a landscape are powerful drivers of change in that landscape, and these people are continually improving their practices through discussions with their friends and neighbours. Community organisations like Landcare work with *local* processes of

¹ R. Eversole, Community agency and community participation: Re-theorising participation in governance, *Journal of Public Policy*, 31, 1, 51-71.

governance within communities. Here, we don't mean corporate governance (the way corporate entities handle their responsibilities), but public governance — the way government, business and civil society work together to take action for the common good. As Landcare members, we need to be much more forthright in asserting the value of community Landcare as an effective form of local governance.

Here are four distinctive features of Landcare's way of organising community action:

1. *Community Landcare engages the whole person and their social world.* Landcare groups know that you need to start with each individual's passions and problems, or you don't get far. And they know that individuals are part of families, networks and communities, so you need to work there as well. Landcare's committees of management draw together the social knowledge needed to connect people making their first steps, to more experienced Landcarers. Landcare members and their support staff put a premium on informal social interaction. They take time talking about the season, the family and how the farm is going, alongside talk about weeds and last year's reveg. Where government staff might see in this something too informal to succeed, **Landcare members know Landcare only works because it's personal.**
2. *Community Landcare creates relationships of mutual responsibility.* **What people decide to do together, with their neighbours and their friends, usually gets done.** People feel a responsibility not just to make a difference to the environment, but to do what they have agreed they will do. To tap this social force, Landcare groups and networks take the time to develop relationships of mutual responsibility. They know that when people get results and feel the companionship of working on a shared task, they go on to do more. Government programs don't rely on relationships of mutual responsibility, and so have less access to trust and reciprocity; they rely on relationships of contractual responsibility, which have higher overheads.
3. *Community Landcare provides a place where people can think and argue about what is important to their community.* Landcare doesn't arrive from some distant state or national government with an agenda; it's strength is that it becomes what each community wants to do. Government programs arrive with an agenda, and then look for ways to get people involved. In community Landcare, there is always a place for new and differing views and those who have the interest debate what ought to be done.. **Community Landcare is a place where communities can set their own goals for improving the environment and enriching local relationships.**
4. *Community Landcare supports action when people are ready for action.* **The currency of community action is volunteer effort.** Landcare groups and networks scan what people are interested in, find who is ready to move, and organises the support they need to take action. They don't put plans ahead of commitment, because they want to tap the creativity and energy that develops as people work together. They cultivate interest and wait until people are ready for action. Government programs make detailed plans because this is what government expects and because they have the financial resources to implement their plans. Landcare doesn't have that luxury. Its path is to build up readiness for action in relationships of mutual responsibility, and provide just enough support at the right moment.

Landcare is a way for communities to make their own decisions and initiate their own action. The presumption that the only way to get things done is to walk lockstep with governments' agenda and ways of working needs to be challenged. We need both ways of organising action, and that needs to be explained to staff of government programs, patiently and tactfully, whenever they presume that their program can operate without paying attention to community action, or to Landcare.

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