Stakeholder perceptions of the impact of the declaration of an Urban Development Area in Moranbah – how sustainable will the outcomes be?

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Abstract: Moranbah is a rural mining town experiencing severe housing stress. In an effort to expedite the delivery of affordable housing, the Queensland State Government declared 1218 hectares of Moranbah, Queensland as an Urban Development Area in July 2010. Urban Development Areas declared elsewhere have not been met with enthusiasm by all, with accusations of a creep towards state dominance in planning. The nature of power and politics in modern day society needs to be considered to understand these accusations. Governance has replaced government and dictates community participation, but community consultation does not always produce sustainable planning outcomes. Concrete outcomes need to be identified to evaluate the success of community participation programs. This paper addresses the apparent gap in town planning literature as to whether or not State intervention in rural resource towns, such as Moranbah, would lead to sustainable planning outcomes. It provides not only evidence from the literature, but also stakeholder data to argue the case against indiscriminate State intervention.

Key words: community consultation, sustainable planning outcomes, UDA, self-determination

Introduction

‘... it’s a funny place, it really is a bit of an oasis in the middle of nowhere and you don’t realise it till you come here and have a look at the place. I mean, everybody says before they come here they think it’s just going to be this little tiny mining town with nothing...’ (Andy).

Moranbah is a modern rural mining town, one of the three Utah Development Company coal towns established in northern Queensland alongside Blackwater and Dysart in 1973 (Freestone, 2010). It has been experiencing housing problems such as high costs, limited supplies, variable standards and a mismatch between housing types and needs (Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, 2009). Isaac Regional Council (IRC) approached the State Government for assistance (Urban Land Development Authority, 2010a) and as a result 1218 hectares of land in Moranbah was declared an Urban Development Area (UDA) in July 2010 (Urban Land Development Authority, 2010b). There are no legislative criteria for the nomination of a site to be declared a UDA, although sites are typically in high growth areas experiencing housing pressures (Urban Land Development Authority, 2008).

The problems in Moranbah are typical of those in several other rural resource towns in Queensland where Local Governments are battling to provide an adequate supply of affordable housing (Urban Land Development Authority, 2010c), and dealing with the resultant employment and social problems. The establishment of the Urban Land Development Authority (ULDA), under the Urban Land Development Authority Act 2007 was a Queensland State Government effort to address these problems. The ULDA serves as vehicle for the expedited delivery of affordable housing through the process of declaration of Urban Development Areas (UDAs) in identified problem areas. The ULDA effectively takes over the role of assessment authority from the local government, as well as the role of developer until such time as the developed UDA is handed back to the local government.
There has been a mixed reaction to the UDLA since its inception. Regional councils of resource communities have, in general, welcomed the ULDA, whereas in urban areas it has generally been viewed as interventionist (Local Government Association of Queensland LTD., 2010). Some view it as a transgression of the rights of government: the ULDA is less constrained in executing its powers than the State, or any State Agencies, since it is not bound by the Sustainable Planning Act 2009 (HopgoodGamin Lawyers, 2010). Attention has also been drawn to the way the ULDA came into existence: the Urban Land Authority Act of 2007 was ‘quietly’ put through Queensland Parliament (Wilson, 2008). A group of Queensland mayors has accused the Queensland Government of grabbing control of planning through the ULDA; a ‘powerful, unaccountable and unelected authority’ (Tully, 2010, p. 1). Previous Brisbane Lord Mayor Campbell Newman claimed that the ULDA is a ‘power grab’ by the State Government (Wilson, 2008, p. 1). It has been described as being a ‘backward step for sustainability’ due to the influence big developers can exert over the State Government, while the community has no say in the declaration of the UDA and no appeal rights (Tully, 2010, p. 1). Based on certain changes in recent legislation, including the establishment of the ULDA, the Queensland Government has been accused of a gradual creep towards state domination in planning (HopgoodGamin Lawyers, 2010).

**Background**

The first issue that comes to mind when considering the background against which the establishment and activities of the ULDA took place, is the nature of power and politics in modern day society. Power and politics have transcended formal democracy to other forms, thereby promoting the concepts of liveability and environmental sustainability (Gualini, 2010). ‘Governance’ has replaced ‘government’ in society through a less hierarchical structure where command has been replaced by cooperation (Gualini, 2010; Healy, 2010), and where people tend to only accept or abide by Government action or policy when they have sound reasons to do so (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003). Good governance is reflected in clear outcomes, which brings about trust and common goals (Sanoff, 2000; Verma, 2010), but it also requires the transformation of government structures and processes since bureaucracy hampers participatory development (McGrath, Armstrong, & Marinova, 2004). This current viewpoint has led to the burgeoning of stakeholder groups and a focus on planning of citizen participation (Hajer & Wagenaar, 2003) where the emergent policy structures are open to much higher levels of scrutiny by stakeholders and citizens (McGrath, Armstrong & Marinova, 2004). In spite of these changes in societal views, the authors argue that there are still remnants of bureaucratic paternalism evident in planning policy and systems in Queensland, paternalism being defined as an action that is taken with the intention of benefitting the individual or group, but without their informed consent (Karlsson & Nilholm, 2006).

It is clear that planning systems and outcomes reflect the dynamics between planning, power and politics (Healy, 2010). In the 1970s it was argued that planning systems and practices are a tool of the state, and decision-making power was thus in the hands of the economic elite (Healy, 2010).

Currently, a new and transformational role for planning has emerged in response to calls made by the United Nations, the World Bank, scholars and the World Planners Congress (Young, 2008). This new rights-based approach (Murray, Tshabangu, & Erlank, 2010) to participation in the planning process holds that citizens are entitled to be active participants in the quest for finding solutions to problems that affect them. It is acknowledged that the specific culture of a community should serve as the basis for planning, and that the utilisation of local knowledge is a pre-requisite for sound ‘planning outcomes’ (Young, 2008). In Australia, this more participatory approach has been hampered by the existence of bureaucratic silos (Head, 2007), impacting on the sustainability of planning outcomes.

The philosophical question underlying the concept ‘sustainable’ is how social and equity goals can be balanced with economic and environmental goals (Grant, 2007; Pears, 2007). The concept of ‘sustainability’ cannot be defined exactly due to the complex and unpredictable ways in which social, ecological and economic objectives interact (Grant, 2007). In addition, humans have the ability to both increase and decrease sustainability, and the same methods that in the past have produced unsustainable outcomes, cannot be used today. A second problem pertaining to ‘sustainability’ is that there is no clear-cut way to achieve it. Constant technological advances and changes occur, necessitating the ongoing identification and consideration of new alternatives (Pears, 2007). This
makes it difficult to determine when the goal of sustainable development has actually been achieved. The implication is that planning policies will need to be flexible and allow for innovation if they are to be effective tools in the quest to achieve sustainability, and that current planning methods need to be inclusive and capable of dealing with ambiguities (Pears, 2007). The ULDA (2008) acknowledges the fact that ‘sustainability’ includes the aim of ‘social sustainability’ which is to enhance social interaction, protect vulnerable sections of the community, respect diversity in the community and build social capital. Since ‘sustainability’ is time and place specific, local social, economic and environmental context is a critical factor (Beder, 1996; Pini & McKenzie, 2006)

The local context in small towns differs substantially from those in big cities and unique challenges and opportunities are presented to the authorities involved in planning in small towns (Sanoff, 2000). In situations where external policies and regulations (as is the case here) determine the management of resources in rural towns, it is important that these areas not be undermined, as there are clear links between the quality of food, water, the environment and rural sustainability (Rogers & Jones, 2006). Especially in the case of external intervention, the role of Local Governments in rural towns should be acknowledged, since generalised bodies of authority (such as the ULDA) with no stake in the partnership presents a significant barrier to success (Griffin & Curtin, 2007).

The question can then be asked what do? legitimate town planning outcomes mean at the Local Government level, where all these policies, programs and initiatives ‘come together and get enacted’ (Verma, 2010, p. 399). Local Governments play an important role in the sustainability of small towns due to their geographical and relation proximity to the community (Martin, 2006) and they are crucial members of any development partnerships (Griffin & Curtin, 2007). In addition, they are more likely to effectively and efficiently involve communities in sustainable practices and approaches (Whelan, 2007). The term ‘community’ is ‘synonymous with the very essence of planning’ (Campbell, 2005, p. 517). Reorienting society towards sustainability requires new skills that Local Governments need to transfer to communities (Tilbury & Wortman, 2008). Sustainability education, resource management and community action are activities that Local Governments should embrace (Potts, Merson, & Kachka, 2007) to achieve a sustainable community where people are empowered with shared responsibility (Rogers & Jones, 2006).

An advantage of community participation and involvement is that it relays to any participant that the relevant authority has concerns for his/her wellbeing (Sanoff, 2000). Social capital is built due to an improved public spirit, financial improvement and a better maintained physical environment (Sanoff, 2000) but demands early inclusion since it encourages consensus to emerge amongst the stakeholders, and ensures active participation and sustained involvement (Brownhill, 2009). At the same time, participation should be a culture and not an ad hoc approach to individual projects (Murray, et al., 2010). Collaborative processes should not be regarded as a magic solution. Thus far white, educated middle class groups have tended to be over-represented in participative processes (Gualini, 2010) and representation on behalf of residents has not always delivered desired outcomes (Gualini, 2010). The measures of community participation success (or ‘sustainable planning outcomes’) are reaching agreements that are in the interest of the public, the utilisation of a superior planning process and enhanced social capital construction (Cullen, Gordon, Gunton, & Day, 2010).

**Research question**

This research project aimed to provide an answer to the question of whether the declaration of the Moranbah UDA would lead to sustainable planning outcomes. It also endeavoured to establish if there was proof in current literature of a link between certain levels, and the timing of stakeholder participation, and sustainable planning outcomes.

**Theoretical frameworks**

Theoretical concepts that were relevant to this research included ‘Self-determination theory’, ‘Causal agency Theory’, and more briefly ‘Social Production of Space Theory’ and ‘Communicative Planning Theory’. Figure 1 depicts the theoretical framework.

<Insert Figure 1 here>
Democracy is underpinned by the assumption that typical citizens have a right, and are qualified, to govern themselves and their communities (Karlsson & Nilholm, 2006). Mainstream sociology has strong influences on planning theory, also in the area of stakeholder participation (Watson, 2008). The right to determine group and personal outcomes is described by ‘Self-determination Theory’ which emerged from the philosophical doctrine of determinism. Determinism posits ‘that events, in this context human behaviour and actions, are effects of preceding causes’ (Wehmeyer, 2004, p.260). Clements (2004, p. 60) defines the term self-determination as

‘The ability of people/s to name, create and control their own history....(here) the ‘self’ of self-determination refers to groups of people’.

The authors argue here that this theoretical framework can be applied to stakeholder participation and involvement in town planning but the question should be asked whether it holds true if there are still strong paternalistic overtones in the approaches of state, local government and other governmental bodies. Research on self-determination has highlighted the significance of environments and situations that provide decision-makers the opportunity to support community autonomy, which leads to high levels of self-determination and more adaptive cognitive, affective and behavioural outcomes (Vallerand & Pelletier, 2008). The prevailing culture and characteristics of the context in which individuals or communities find themselves play an important part in motivation (Vallerand & Pelletier, 2008) and can be seen in the image that the group ascribes to themselves. This image can be an obstacle to community development, especially if the community or parts thereof deem themselves to be victimised or oppressed (Clements, 2004). Added to that is the fact that group motivation can change over time, which has an important impact on how people achieve more adaptive outcomes and a more meaningful life situation during different stages of a process (Vallerand & Pelletier, 2008). Decisions need to be made by the people most affected by the outcome, and communities need to retain and maintain the maximum possible control over what happens in their communities (Clements, 2004).

‘Causal Agency Theory’ expands on self-determination theory by explaining how people and groups can become more self-determined (Wehmeyer, 2004, p. 351). ‘Causal’ refers to the interaction of cause and effect; ‘causal action/behaviour’ to ‘action or behaviour that is purposeful, planned and intentional’ (Wehmeyer, 2004, p. 353). ‘Capability’ refers to the capacity of the different stakeholder groups and ‘challenge’ refers to the specific event or conditions that require a group to address a problem or threat (Wehmeyer, 2004, p. 353). To this a third dimension is added, that of Causal Affect which refers to the emotions that regulate human behaviour (Wehmeyer, 2004).

An additional theoretical dimension relevant in this research project pertains to sustainable planning outcomes can be determined or measured. Lefebvre’s (2009) theory of the Social Production of Space emphasises that decisive, concrete or material outcomes are necessary to measure the effectiveness of stakeholder consultation processes. Outcomes need to be defined in terms of the following: place specificity, face-to-face relationship between planners and stakeholders, period of time, mutual responsibility and social learning, relationship between knowledge and action, and prevalence in all stages of planning, from pre-project to post-project (Carp, 2004).

Communicative Planning Theory is an emerging post-modern paradigm aimed at social justice and environmental sustainability (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002). It is argued that the problems arising from democracy can be solved through argument (Allmendinger & Tewdwr-Jones, 2002), resulting in a case for transformative argument rather than the dominance based on numbers found in democracy. It is relevant in this situation where planning decisions are made by democratically elected members of government at two levels, namely the state and local government level. Communicative planning theory ‘aims to replace scientific and technical information as the source of planners’ decisions with public deliberation, democratic debate and local knowledge’ in effect resisting dominance and creep by the formal economy and government (Watson, 2008, p. 227).

Methodology
This paper is the synthesis of a largely qualitative research project that included a comprehensive review of current literature on stakeholder consultation, sustainable planning outcomes and
governance; and the data collected during twenty face-to-face interviews supplemented by data collected through the use of questionnaires completed by the twenty interviewees.

The population or the target group about whom we wanted to develop knowledge (Punch, 2006) was Councillors, Council Officials, business owners and representatives from community organisations. Purposive sampling was used to sample deliberately (Punch, 2006) according to the logic of the research. Primary data was collected on site through elite interviews and self-administered questionnaires from key stakeholders representing several major stakeholder groups.

The aim with the data collection was to achieve depth or richness of the data. Validity and reliability were addressed during the design and execution of the research: the richness of the data, different question types in the questionnaires, quasi-statistics, investigation of discrepant evidence and the use of Nvivo9 to confirm the initial themes or categories observed.

**Major findings**

There is clear evidence in the literature of a link between successful stakeholder consultation processes and sustainable planning outcomes. The major findings of this research project are based on weighing the results of the data analysis against the criteria for effective stakeholder consultation and sustainable planning outcomes revealed in current literature. These criteria include place specificity of planning strategies, the relationship between the major stakeholders, the duration of the government intervention, the timing of stakeholder participation and the decision-making power.

The major finding is that the State intervention through the declaration of a UDA will not lead to sustainable planning outcomes in Moranbah. The lack of frontloading of stakeholder participation during the stage leading up to the declaration of the UDA, coupled with the shortened time frames for submissions will negatively impact on stakeholder participation. This conclusion was strengthened by the observation of a significant lack of trust in the motives and competency of all levels of government, to which is added significant distrust in the motives of the mining companies, making the stakeholders less likely to accept or abide by this State intervention. The remnants of paternalism in the Local Government compound this problem, leading to distorted stakeholder participation patterns and poor decision-making by decision-makers, which in turn lead to non-sustainable planning outcomes. Other interpretations were ruled out through the involvement of a variety of stakeholder groups and the collection of rich data to ensure that valid conclusions could be drawn.

State Government and politicians elicit low levels of trust from all participant groups, ranging from total distrust in politicians in general, to doubt as to whether the State Government actually cared about the well-being of the non-mining sectors in Moranbah (Figure 1). Much of the distrust in the State Government stemmed from the perceived corruptness of the relationship between the Government and the mining industry, and the view that the mining industry dictates to Government. The FIFO-issue was of particular concern, with predictions that it will impact greatly on the composition of the Moranbah population. The perception was that the more the mines implement FIFO, the less they will be committed to the local communities. This contrasts with the perception of the residents that the town is starting to ‘mature’, with people wanting to retire there and a desire for improved facilities, such as a tertiary education institution. This long-term vision for the town is currently marred by an atmosphere of fear brought about by issues such as the application by one of the mines to have a 100 percent Fly-in-fly-out (FIFO) workforce and the mining operations moving closer to town. Moranbah is perceived by participants as the dominant town in the IRC area due the quality of services provided, and the relatively long history of the town which has resulted in several three-generation families living in town.

Only 16 percent of the participants were of the opinion that the State Government (through the ULDA) would do a better job than IRC steering development in Moranbah and only 10 percent of the participants was of the opinion that the State Government/ULDA would heed their wishes in future development decisions.

<Insert Figure 2 here>

Lack of confidence in Council was reported with 86 percent of participants only rating Council in the
Lack of communication between the different stakeholder groups was reported to exacerbate the problem and people feared the outcome of the direction that the development of the town is taking.

Stakeholder consultation is deemed to be ‘Quite important’ or ‘extremely important’ in principle but 90 percent of the participants rated the current necessity ‘Extremely high’ (Figure 3). Participants identified obstacles preventing effective and efficient stakeholder consultation in general and in Moranbah specifically. The passivity of the community was ascribed to lack of confidence, self-interest, ineffective processes and the need for leadership.

Recommendations

Future research could include a longitudinal study of community involvement in planning in Moranbah and the determination of concrete planning outcomes to evaluate the effectiveness of such community involvement. It could also be expanded to include similar towns such as Roma and Blackwater, that were subject to UDA declarations at the same time as Moranbah, to lend greater validity to findings.

The following brief recommendations may be considered:

- Training in current governance models for senior staff and councillors in order to move beyond paternalistic, bureaucratic approaches in planning. It is important that the limitations of democracy be realised and managed. This could be augmented by greater exposure to current planning practice for all parties involved in planning and decision-making.
- Following on from the previous point, the establishment of permanent stakeholder consultation strategies and processes in Moranbah, preferably including all sectors of stakeholders, including the mines, unions and State Government. The nature of the stakeholder consultation program should be considered, with the possibility of a layered system that would enable people to participate at a level, to an extent and in a format that they feel comfortable with.
- The disconcerting fact that worldwide very few mining towns remain sustainable after the closure of mines (Tuck, et al., 2005) should be addressed at a strategic level, taking the whole of IRC into consideration.

Conclusion

The answer to the question whether the declaration of the UDA was thus ‘a rare occasion’ where paternalistic decision-making was acceptable is ‘No’. The ULDA may well be the ‘top-down, decide-announce-defend government arrangement’ (Whelan, 2007) it was labelled by other communities where UDAs had been declared prior to the declaration of the Moranbah UDA. It seems to provide one more example of plans and policies 'done for rural Australia but not by it' (Rogers & Jones, 2006, p. 12). Secondly, the answer to the question if decision-making in the UDA process was based on a self-determination model (Karlsson & Nilholm, 2006) that would lead to sustainable planning outcomes, is also ‘No’. Indications are that indiscriminate application of State intervention procedures does not produce sustainable planning outcomes, especially in unique rural areas such as Moranbah. These early warning signs should be heeded in the application of similar interventions in other rural towns.
Figure 2: Participant perception of best interest of stakeholder groups

Figure 3: Participant perception of Councillors’ and Officials’ attitude and competence
**Figure 4: Participant perceptions of importance of stakeholder consultation**

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