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Governments & Communities in Partnership

From Theory to Practice

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Unrefereed Presentation

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THE END OF DEMOCRACY?

Good afternoon

I'm Helen Adams and I have the honour to be the Executive Officer of the Western Region Disability Network (WRDN).

You would have heard a lot over the past days about Networks – what they are or aren't; how they work, what they achieve, their strengths and their failings. What I want to talk to you about today is the Network that I work for and use our experiences to raise with you some questions about the relationship between governments and community based networks

The WRDN started in 1992 as an informal interagency network of service providers who were concerned about the lack of services for people with a disability and who believed that they could make a difference by sharing information, knowledge and resources.

Over the last 14 years the WRDN has evolved and grown. The WRDN of today has elements of but does not exclusively fall into any of the 3 domains Professor Considine outlines in his paper "Partnerships and Collaborative Advantage" (Considine 2005). The WRDN is not a network of organisations linked through joint mandates or resource dependencies – although the partnerships between like and non aligned organisations are an essential part. Nor is it a network of managers or even of advocates although managers and advocates are part of the membership. It is neither episodic – having existed for this length of time, nor issue centric – although the WRDN brings together people who share a concern about a particular issue, policy or event for a combined response. It is no longer simply an interagency network. And yet while it is none of these it is all of these. It is in fact "more than just the sum of its individual parts" (Considine 2005: 2)

So what is it? The WRDN is actually a complex alliance between a range of parties who share the common link of interest in disability issues within a certain geographic area. It is an active collaboration between 2 levels of government and the community. It is a working partnership between individual people and people within organisations, between service providers and service users, government and community who share a common vision which transcends their differences and sector interests. A vision that commends the voice of people with a disability and those that support them as the most important influence on government policy and the development of social capital.

This alliance, captured in the title of "Western Region Disability Network", is made up of more than 500 members - people with disabilities, their unpaid carers and families, the services providers that support them, government and the community. The membership is split approximately 60% people with disabilities and carers and 40% service providers and community. Increasingly the term 'service providers' is extending to include those universal services for which people with disabilities are only a small part of their overall client group. Organisations we all use such as Local Government, Centrelink, schools and Health Centres.

The WRDN covers the 7 Local Government Areas of Western Metropolitan Melbourne. The WRDN is inclusive of all disability 'types' and open to all age groups. Membership is free.

The WRDN is auspiced by annecto-the people network. Annecto is a large disability and aged care agency with its base and history in the Western Metro Melbourne. Annecto takes responsibility for the

legal aspects such as staff employment and financial accountability but day to day management of the WRDN is undertaken by a Coordinating Group elected from and by the membership. The Coordinating Group is made up of 5 people with a disability, 3 carers and 2 service providers plus ex-officio 2 more service providers, annecto and DHS Disability Programs. The Chair of the WRDN is a person with a disability, the Vice Chair a carer/partner of a person with a disability.

The WRDN has 2 major functions. The first is the dissemination of information to the membership. This is achieved in several ways.

- A weekly electronic update contains direct links to diverse information such as the work of the WRDN plus grants, media, new programs and initiatives, recreational activities and camps, meetings, forums and conferences.
- The WRDN produces a bi-monthly newsletter because 182 of our members – mainly people with disabilities are not connected to the internet. The West has the lowest level of home internet use in Melbourne
- The WRDN runs regular and one-off forums across the year. These meetings have three purposes – information dissemination, networking/relationship building and as one way to gather the collective view of the membership on current issues and concerns. Feedback is also gathered by email and phone or via discussions within a support group or agency which then presents that groups collective view at the forum or in another form.

The second role is to be the conduit for the voice of disability in the West – to present the views of the membership to planners and decision makers at a local, regional and State-wide level. The WRDN is an active member of many reference groups, committees and networks. E.g. the WRDN has been assisting the Victorian Electoral Commission to make voting centers more accessible and to develop a training video for all 16,000 staff who will work on our next State election day – which is in November this year. The WRDN is also linked to other forums such as the Community Services Ministers' Disability Advisory Council through individual member participation. In those cases the WRDN membership views are used to inform and support that individual in their advocacy role.

As far as we can ascertain the WRDN is one of a kind – unique in the Victorian disability field at least. We have not been able to find another network that effectively draws together all the parties to look at a topic from all perspectives. So when we write formal letters and submissions or present feedback at consultations we believe we present a truly holistic analysis of an issue, policy or event.

Generally I think this is pretty impressive for an organisation led by 2 part time staff. How does it work? By harnessing the impressive energy of our members. Who really has the influence in our network? I like to think that it is shared with an increasing emphasis on people with disabilities including people with higher support needs.

The work of the WRDN is even more impressive if you consider the economic circumstances of the West. The West is the most disadvantaged region in Victoria – even more so than the rural regions (DHS Policy and Funding Plan 2003-6). According to SEIFA – the index of socio economic disadvantage:

- Brimbank is the second most disadvantaged LGA in Victoria followed by Maribyrnong. Both are in the West.

- Braybrook, an inner western suburb, is the most disadvantaged suburb in Victoria.

The Australian Bureau of Statistics tells us:

- 20% of the population have some kind of disability. That equates to approx. 123,000 people in the WMR.
- 13% of the population (or 80,000 people in the West) care for someone with a disability or who is aged, increasingly both.
- Most Western LGAs have high levels of people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Backgrounds e.g. Brimbank 53.9% (ABS 2001)
- Many of the emerging communities – the refugee populations - are settling in the West.
- WMR education levels are lower, school retention issues worse and unemployment and disadvantage higher.

The relationship between socio economic disadvantage and disability is universally accepted.

On a more positive note the WRDN lives and works within a political environment which espouses the rights of people with a disability. The Victorian Government has produced a number of progressive and forward thinking statements which outline its vision of Victoria as an inclusive society “in which diversity is embraced and celebrated” and where everyone “has the same opportunities to participate in the life of the community, and the same responsibilities towards society as all other citizens of Victoria.” (Victorian State Plan 2002-2012). The “A Fairer Victoria” document commits Victoria to being more inclusive and to giving people with disabilities the right to be active participants in community and civic life.

The Victorian State Plan outlines the changes and the strategies that need to be employed in order to make this vision a reality – including making the community more inclusive by building and strengthening partnerships and through collaboration with and between government, government departments, service providers and the community. The State Plan talks about including people with disabilities in decision making and enhancing their choices and options.

In fact if you dissect the strategies of the Victorian State Plan you will find that it outlines the very roles, tasks and processes that the WRDN employs on a day to day basis – community building, empowerment, information, a voice in decision making, inclusion and acceptance of diversity. The WRDN is seen to cut across the silos of government, role and ‘label’ – to build bridges and understanding, raising community awareness and drawing together parties that have traditionally not been linked or that have been competitors in some way, combatants in the search for and control of services, resources and influence and to enhance communication and trust between them. The WRDN is a network that demonstrates partnerships and collaboration in action.

Most of the Local Councils are active members of the network. State government is involved through the participation of DHS, the Victorian Electoral Commission and our links with other government departments. One would imagine then that the Victorian Government would be fostering and supporting this organisation and others of our ilk. But sadly this is not so. The Department of Human Services Disability Programs North and Western Metropolitan Region has in fact removed its financial support of the WRDN, leaving us with a yearly income of \$30,000 from the regional Home and Community Care Program.

One could question DHSs commitment to the voice of disability when the Western and our equivalent in the Northern Metropolitan Region (the Northern Region Disability Network) – those very structures that support and foster people in their self advocacy role were defunded. Was this decision a discrete but effective way to silence those voices who challenge the powers-that-be to turn the visions of the Victorian State Plan into reality? Was it designed to quieten the voices that raise awareness as to how current structures disenfranchise the very people they are supposedly empowering? Was it a decision based on a desire to minimise the collective presentation of dissent and concern? One would sincerely hope not. However this appears to have been the consequence if not the design.

The decision by DHS Disability Programs not to continue the funding arrangements of many years standing prompted a funding crisis for both organisations. Was this to be the end or was it a time for a re-birth, a re-think and rejuvenation? Was it an end to democracy?

Sadly the Northern Region Disability Network has withered and all but died. No money and no security meant no Co-ordinator. No volunteers picked up the responsibilities and tasks. The loss of this organisation has certainly dented if not ended democracy in the North – for the time being anyway.

But the WRDN has accepted the challenge to revamp, regroup and fight for existence. The membership is working really hard to ensure survival in the short term and achieve sustainability into the future. We have secured 2 philanthropic grants – one to document the WRDN model and another to develop a strategic plan. To undertake these projects we have returned, if we ever moved away from, our grass roots community development processes to gather the information needed to ensure that the final documents are a true reflection of the views of the all the different elements that make up our network. The work is devolved from the staff and the Coordinating Group to the membership. Individuals and groups are taking on facilitation roles and actively encouraging the involvement of their co-workers, group members, friends and family. This empowers, shares power and develops leadership skills.

At the time of writing this process is still underway. But a number of themes are emerging and some things are quite clear. First and foremost the membership wants and needs the WRDN. People believe it builds social capital especially in one of, if not the most, disadvantaged and marginalised groups in society.

It is also recognised that there will always be a need for some ongoing support function. The bigger the organisation the more of a struggle it appears to be to do that coordinating role with volunteer labour alone. So if some form of funding is needed to support networks such as ours who or what should be responsible for providing that funding?

My argument would be that it is a joint responsibility between us all – the community and government at all levels. Members have a responsibility to sustain and grow a network and the capacity of other members. The role of each and every individual member is to contribute through active participation as well as financial and in-kind contributions. Of course in any grass roots organisation there is always a dilemma about fees. One has to be aware that in trying to secure income one may in fact present barriers to participation and exclude those very people who are most in need of inclusion.

Governments role is to provide support directly through funding and indirectly through active involvement fostering those collaborative arrangements that, as Professor Considine so rightly says, “do in fact influence both politics and policy as they deepen democratic engagement and improve the measures that deal with social, economic and environmental problems” (Considine 2005:11).

It's too early to say whether the WRDN will survive. But I'm truly optimistic. We may not end up with the same structure, we may have different priorities but I'm convinced the WRDN will continue to fight for and express the voice of disability in the region. But the relationship between government and the WRDN is a crucial element to the sustainability of the new 2006-onwards WRDN. We will no doubt be seeking the support of government through funding and through the enhancement of our strategic alliances.

I want to conclude by saying that the WRDN is an example of a complex network in action. It is a living, breathing, real-life community building organisation that continues to evolve as it responds to the ever changing needs of its participants and the political, economic and social environment in which it operates. It clearly demonstrates how partnership and network governance can confer a significant collaborative advantage. And it achieves all this because it is a network of participants who share a passion and belief in the rights of people with a disability as equal citizens within an inclusive society.

Thank you.

