

# **BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN POLICY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE: EXPERIENCES FROM A COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT IN NEW ZEALAND**

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## **Abstract**

Policy makers are increasingly looking to expand the avenues for citizens to participate in shaping policies that affect their lives. Well-informed citizens and communities expect governments to take their views and knowledge into account when developing policy solutions on their behalf. Engaging citizens allows the government to tap into wider sources of information and perspectives, thereby improving the quality of the decisions reached. Community participation, in particular, is gaining significance as communities are becoming increasingly vocal and keen for policy makers to “hear” the voice of their experience. However, the challenge for government is in making this *happen* on the ground. This paper captures my experiences in undertaking a pilot study using an action research approach to establish an ongoing dialogue between the policy makers and community groups and, in doing so, to provide opportunities for active engagement on key issues.

## INTRODUCTION

Citizens are not the enemies of the State; they are the rationale for it. In the new consensus, democracy is not a spectator sport. The new democracy is about participation of citizens. It is a journey where diversity is celebrated, the public good is negotiated, and intense deliberation and dialogue are conducted. It is about being involved. (Wyman et al. 2000:75–76)

One of the principles underpinning good governance relates to public participation in the policy-making process, as it “contributes to building public trust, raising quality of democracy and strengthening civic capacity” (OECD 2001). Whereas in the past, policy making was seen as the domain of the government, in modern times, governments all

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over are moving to a more inclusive, collaborative, deliberative policy-making process (Hajer and Wagenaar 2003:35). Creating these avenues for participation and dialogue allows governments to tap into wider sources of information and perspectives and identify potential solutions, thereby improving the quality of decisions reached. Community participation, in particular, is gaining significance as communities are becoming increasingly vocal and keen for policy makers to “hear” the voice of their experience and expect government to take their views and knowledge into account when making decisions.


The first step to making participation real for communities is for policy makers to establish networks and form collaborations with community and voluntary groups so as to accurately reflect the range of community issues. These collaborations offer policy makers an opportunity to tap into the wealth of knowledge, experience and diversity present in communities, thereby enhancing the quality of their policy advice and ensuring that public policy is informed by what is happening on the ground. This also fulfils governments’ desire to develop “bottom-up” policy rather than “top-down” policy. It offers a way for policy makers to establish new networks among the players in the community and increase distribution of knowledge among these players.

This paper uses a Community Economic Development Action Research (CEDAR) project as a case study to illustrate how a government aim of linking community experience to policy making was realised within a policy setting in New Zealand.

### DIFFERENT FORMS OF PUBLIC PARTICIPATION

Public participation can take various forms and it can include a range of activities: from information exchange, to public consultation, engagement/dialogue, shared decisions and shared jurisdiction in decision making (Smith 2002). It can be expressed as a continuum based on the extent of involvement and role in decision making, from information exchange (least) to shared jurisdiction (most). Smith clarifies that these public participation processes are not separated by definitive boundaries – they flow into and build upon each other (see Figure 1).

Figure 1 Public Participation Continuum

Information exchange	Consultation	Engagement/ dialogue	Shared decisions	Shared jurisdiction
Info in; info out	I listen and speak; you listen and speak	We talk and understand each other	We decide	We are responsible and accountable
				

Source: Smith (2002)

A recent OECD publication, *Citizens as Partners* (2001), discusses a three-level participation continuum: information, consultation and active participation. The continuum was developed on the basis of a survey undertaken with member countries to describe the level of participation that each government engages in. The survey revealed that in most member countries participation in the policy-making process has tended to be mainly at the information-exchange level and has shifted more recently to the public consultation level. While access to information in most OECD countries is a fundamental right, it is only recently that public consultation has begun to be seen as an essential element in the policy-making process in most OECD countries. Even in the Netherlands, Finland, Sweden and Denmark, where public consultation is a long-established practice, until recently it was undertaken more informally. The survey notes that very few governments have in fact gone to the next level; that is, to active participation

There is a growing recognition that public consultation as a tool for citizen engagement is limited in that the process is often driven by the policy agencies, and the timetable, format and issues for consultation are defined by the government agency. In such instances, the policy makers set the agenda and communities or voluntary groups are asked to air their views and opinions about the policy, but have little control over the process or the outcome. It is therefore not surprising that communities end up feeling powerless, frustrated and disenchanted with government processes. This disenchantment between policy makers and communities creates an “us versus them” feeling that is not conducive to building a socially cohesive society.

This has led governments to seek out new or improved models and approaches to consulting and engaging with citizens in policy-making processes, so as to gain citizens’ and community support and increase understanding of government policy.

### THE NEW ZEALAND CONTEXT

Within the New Zealand Government, this desire to shift from public consultation to active participation is well illustrated in the Ministry of Social Development’s Statement of Intent on government and community relationships, which states that “the active engagement of community, voluntary, iwi and Māori organisations in decisions that affect them is a sign of healthy democracy.” This is a clear signal for government departments to integrate public input into policy-making processes and respond to a community’s expectation that their voices be heard and reflected in the policy advice. For communities and policy makers to work together and engage in such active dialogue requires that the relationship be underpinned by “shared agenda setting for all participants, a relaxed time frame for deliberation, an emphasis on value

sharing rather than debate and consultative practices based on inclusiveness, courtesy and respect (Institute on Governance 1998).

The New Zealand Department of Labour responded to this challenge in a unique way – by creating the space and the environment for active engagement and sharing of ideas and perspectives between policy makers and communities. The Department initiated a pilot research project to explore possibilities for collective learning about community economic development processes. It did so by walking alongside selected communities as they pursued their economic development goals, identifying systemic issues that helped and/or hindered the communities in this journey and feeding this learning in an ongoing way into the policy-making cycle. The project had a three-year time frame and used an action research methodology whereby the issues for exploration emerged during the research process rather than being predetermined by the Department of Labour.

#### COMMUNITY ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ACTION RESEARCH (CEDAR) PROJECT

In June 2000, the Labour Market Policy Group<sup>2</sup> and the Community Employment Group,<sup>3</sup> service units within the Department of Labour, jointly initiated a three-year pilot project designed to use research as a conduit or bridge for developing closer connection between government policy and “communities”.<sup>4</sup> The project involved researchers, community development fieldworkers and policy analysts walking alongside the three communities to build *grounded* knowledge about the processes of community economic development and feed this learning back to the relevant policy agencies through an ongoing information exchange cycle. An action research methodology was deliberately chosen for two reasons.

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2 The Labour Market Policy Group was disestablished and its functions taken over by the wider Department of Labour. The Department advises government on policy issues related to the labour market to promote better economic and social outcomes. In particular, it helps to enhance employment prospects, participation in the labour force, earnings abilities, skill levels, safe and productive work environments, effective migration, economic growth, and social cohesion through advice on laws and policies relating to these issues.

3 The Community Employment Group, now disestablished, worked with communities and groups to help them achieve social and economic prosperity through local employment and enterprise development. Its functions have been taken over by Enterprising Communities at the Ministry of Social Development and by Te Puni Kōkiri.

4 The term “communities” is used more broadly to refer to a geographically bound area, such as a neighbourhood, city or rural town, as well as networks of relationships based on a common interest or purpose.

- The action research methodology allowed the researchers to set up an active reflection process, through which the project team (researchers, community groups and policy makers) could explore the systemic issues that helped communities or hindered them from reaching their economic development goals and developing solutions.
- The action research methodology helped promote reflective practice at all levels: within communities, among community development workers and among policy makers.

The expectation was that the knowledge and understanding of community economic development processes built over time through such active engagement with communities and community groups would contribute at many levels including:

- changing the policy makers' understanding and concept of the "real" world (Weiss 1991)
- enhancing the quality of the Department's policy advice by ensuring that policy advice reflects the reality of what is happening on the ground
- meeting growing demand from communities, voluntary groups, iwi and Māori organisations for public participation in the policy process
- enhancing community knowledge, understanding and awareness of various policy initiatives and the policy-making process.

#### HOW DID WE GO ABOUT IT?

The CEDAR project was designed as a collaborative project between policy makers and researchers within the Department of Labour, community development workers from the Community Employment Group and the three researched communities, and was located within a policy team. This made it easier for the research team to act as a conduit across all the different groups and balance their different interests and priorities. However, in order to access community-level information and have it considered by policy makers, the research team needed to invest time in building strong personal relationships with both groups – community and community groups on the one hand, and the policy agencies and staff on the other. The team therefore spent considerable time in building these relationships, and the key processes used by CEDAR to make this happen on the ground are discussed below.

#### BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE PARTICIPATING COMMUNITIES

The three communities that were selected to be part of the CEDAR project were: Twizel, a geographically defined rural community; Tu Kahu, a community enterprise; and two Pacific organisations in Christchurch – New Pacific Underground, a performing arts organisation, and Pacific Executive Trust of Canterbury.

The team took a staggered approach to entry into the three “communities” to help refine the methodology with each subsequent action. We invited a selected group of fieldworkers from the Community Employment Group to give us a presentation on their communities and highlight the key issues facing these communities. The CEDAR team then visited each shortlisted “community” and met with key stakeholders in the community at first hand to discuss the opportunity to participate in CEDAR – what participation would involve and the value it offered. However, at this point, the discussions were at a fairly theoretical level as some had never engaged in a project of this type before.

On reflection there were three distinct phases to our relationship-building process with each participating community: the planning cycle, the acting cycle and the observing and reflecting cycle. Then the planning phase would be undertaken again for a new action (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988, Wadsworth 1997a). These cycles started with small questions, and when the planning stages came around again, the project team took account of what had been learnt in the previous cycle. The aim was to increase our understanding of the local situation with each subsequent conversation and visit to the community.

### Phase One: Forming Relationships

During this phase the research team members spent their time talking with key community members in their own homes and/or premises about issues facing their community or community organisation. This initial pool of community members was expanded to include others through a “snowball” sampling technique. Each time we talked to a person we asked them to nominate others we should talk so that we could build a more comprehensive picture of the community and its issues. On occasions, residents asked us to speak with people outside of the immediate community, and we did so. For instance, in Twizel, Meridian Energy was a major employer but was located in Christchurch, four hours away from Twizel. Another instance was when the chief executive of Tu Kahu, the housing enterprise, wanted us to talk to other iwi (tribe) members around the district in order to build a comprehensive understanding of the community, the organisation and its mission. Our aim was to build a holistic picture of the community as well as building a personal relationship with each of them. This process took us three to four months.

### Phase Two: Communication

Communication is vital to establishing high-quality person-to-person relationships with the community, and in recognition of this we established an ongoing cycle of feedback through individual conversations, visit reports and group meetings. We documented and conveyed our initial discussions, observations and understandings to

the community and invited them to comment, respond and debate the issues raised. Through this cycle we built a reasonably rich picture of the community and their issues, and got to know each other a bit better. In this way we worked together towards a participative approach, built a shared understanding of the project and its aims, and demonstrated the action research cycle to the community. This took us approximately six months.

### Phase Three: Identifying the Imperative or the Puzzle

The third phase involved identification of the imperative or “the puzzle” around which the community and the research teams’ energies and actions could be channelled.

Since action research is especially useful in situations where a group of people want to improve some part of their lives, it is critical that the team collaboratively work to identify the puzzling or intriguing question. The first two steps discussed above were intended to build rapport and invite key stakeholders to reflect about issues facing their communities. This third phase was intended to invite the community as a whole to work with the research team and each other on the issues that needed to be improved (action aim) and what we needed to find out (research problem) and negotiate how we may go about these tasks. We talked to key individuals during our visits to the community every six weeks, expanded this group to include other members, and spent this time building individual relationships with each member in the group.

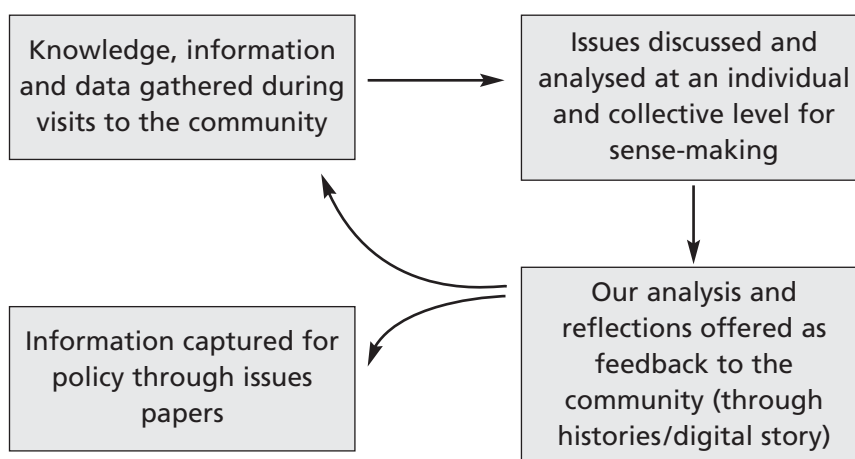
As our understanding of the community developed, we organised brainstorming meetings, allowing issues to emerge in an inductive way. From our perspective there were no fixed agendas. We placed information gathered from conversations with key members before them, and asked questions of the community to collectively identify significant issues that prevented them from moving towards economic development. This process took a series of meetings, and at each stage the discussion and data analysis were made very transparent. The communities said that in the past they had never seen material generated from discussions, and often the final reports had been taken to such a level of abstraction that they often could not see themselves or their community issues in the final report.

We worked at the pace of the community: we did not push the timeframes, we did not push an agenda, and we did not push to arrive at common issues, but allowed it to emerge of its own accord.

## GENERATING DATA AND TRANSFERRING IT TO POLICY

The CEDAR project was intended to demonstrate a process whereby policy agencies could obtain information from communities and use it to stretch the thinking of policy makers. An action research approach was suited to this task because it gave the team members the time and space to reflect on emerging issues and make relevant policy connections. It also contributed to capacity building at both ends: policy makers learned about “real” issues and communities learned about the policy-making process, and both built capacity to identify opportunities for meaningful collaborations. The way in which this was achieved in the CEDAR project is illustrated in the following diagram:

Figure 2 Action Research



This cyclical process of making connections between community-generated issues and the policy-development process in CEDAR can be illustrated through the work the team did in representing the volunteering issue. A series of individual and collective conversations with Twizel residents revealed that there has been a downward trend in the number of willing, available and skilled volunteers. According to the individuals interviewed, there appeared to be a general reluctance for people to volunteer for a variety of reasons, including the fact that some residents had moved to rural communities for lifestyle reasons – to get away from the rush and pressures of urban life.

The issue of a diminishing volunteer base is of concern for Twizel and other rural communities, because these communities rely on the work and support of volunteers for many of their infrastructural services, such as policing, fire service, ambulance



services and even governance through community boards and school boards. Sustaining even a small number of individuals to participate in voluntary work had therefore become challenging due to increased responsibility, increased paperwork and increased pressure on time.

In considering the issue, the CEDAR team decided to explore how this issue was perceived within the policy space at Wellington and noted that government response was already underway through policy work on Volunteers and Volunteering, undertaken by the Ministry of Social Development. The team initiated meetings with the policy team at the Ministry of Social Development to discuss key issues and challenges faced by rural communities in sustaining a strong volunteer base so as to ensure that these issues were considered within the existing policy development process. The knowledge gained through CEDAR gave a real understanding of barriers to volunteering as experienced by communities, and this understanding was captured through an issues paper. The end result was that the advice sent to the Minister, and later considered by Cabinet, had specific references to volunteering issues – thus contributing to improved debate around key issues.

This experience also gave the CEDAR team the credibility to represent community issues accurately in policy forums, thereby fulfilling its role as the bridge between policy and practice. Over time the CEDAR team developed a range of ways to help build effective connections with policy makers, including presentations to senior officials' groups, dialoguing with relevant government agencies, and one-to-one discussions with key influencers.

This cycle of ongoing analysis, action and reflection about key policy areas undertaken over the period of the project resulted in capacity building, both for the communities (clarifying the issues and how they may respond to them as a community) and for policy makers (enabling policy papers to discuss the implications of the government response from a community perspective).

In order to sustain policy interest and connection, the CEDAR team experimented with a number of strategies, including:

- writing issues papers where a community-generated issue was captured, analysed and discussed for a policy audience (the purpose of these papers was to generate discussion and debate about the issue and implications for policy)
- commenting on policy papers (policy papers that were written at a national level and circulated across government departments presented an opportunity to feed back learnings and insights gathered from working with communities)
- presentations to the Minister and Senior Officials Groups

- cross-government agency seminars to support collaborative processes for working across sectors and outside of traditional government silos
- specific conversations on policy issues with specific policy agencies.

### ON REFLECTION

Civic participation in policy making is based on the premise that citizens and communities have important knowledge and experience to add to the public policy debate. The challenge for government is to set up a process that encourages the parties to the debate to deepen their understanding of the issues and discuss their implications in a meaningful way. In order for such commitment to be put into action, government agencies and communities must increase their capacities for working collaboratively to inform and stimulate mutual learning.

As discussed earlier, many individuals and groups feel cynical about the policy-making process and particularly their ability to participate or influence this process. However, through CEDAR we have tried to pilot an approach that demonstrated (albeit in a limited way) how engagement can be achieved. A key factor in successful engagement has been working with communities to identify issues that are relevant and significant to them at that time. This might mean that the government agency's agenda will take a back seat for the time being, and may involve working on issues that are beyond the scope of the government agency initiating the engagement.

On reflection, the opportunity to engage in active dialogue through CEDAR has been an enriching experience for all participants, and their responses overall have been positive.

- Community development practitioners had the opportunity to experience a different way of working that is more collaborative, explicit, questioning and reflective.
- Researchers had the opportunity to experience at first hand the value of participatory processes and what it takes to leverage such experiences for policy discussions.
- Communities learned about government processes and how they can liaise with key bridge people to work across sectors.
- Government policy makers learned about community processes and how they can incorporate community experience into their policy advice.

## KEY CHALLENGES

Sustaining engagement efforts with communities can be challenging for a range of reasons. For the government agency initiating the engagement effort, some of the key challenges in building a successful relationship with communities related to time, capacity, the project “boundaries” and the mind set of communities and government. In this section, we explore some of these challenges, using examples from the CEDAR project where relevant, and hope that other groups embarking on similar engagement efforts can learn from and build on our experiences.

### Consultation versus Collaboration

As noted earlier in this paper, public participation can take various forms and can include a range of activities. However, there needs to be a shared understanding across the groups involved about the type of participation sought through an engagement effort. If not, the groups can end up talking past one another, as we discovered in CEDAR. Residents came to the initial meetings organised by CEDAR with the expectation that they were being consulted about key issues. Therefore, there was an expectation that the CEDAR team would identify the issues and the process for working them through. The residents would then be expected to either agree or disagree to the suggested process.

However, the CEDAR team was seeking a much greater level of involvement and participation. We wanted to actively dialogue with the residents and hoped to work together to collectively identify the issues and the puzzles and explore the implications of these issues and puzzles for the community. This meant that in the early meetings and discussions we were talking past one another, and there was a sense of frustration.

### Engaging in Learning

Governments fund community organisations to deliver social services, and there is a well-designed process that allows community organisations to be selected as providers. This leads to a model whereby community organisations and government enter into a contract-for-funding arrangement.

However, this funding usually does not cover learning, investment in learning or development of skills and capability of the organisations that deliver these services. The value of the CEDAR project lay in the opportunity it provided communities to participate in a learning experience. Community groups that participated in CEDAR admitted to extending their understanding because of the opportunity it presented to explore, examine and critically reflect on key issues. The participants appreciated this opportunity as they learned new skills, developed new perspectives and identified

new ways of working together. By pulling together community groups, researchers and policy makers, CEDAR opened the doors for discussion and dialogue between them. Community groups became more aware of various policy initiatives, built new networks outside the community and asked questions of their own “practice”.

“NKII invests in training for its Board Members covering topics such as governance and management, roles and responsibilities of Board members, etc. The outcomes envisaged is that Board Members develop necessary skills and competencies that would contribute to efficient and smooth running of the Board. However, generating interest and involvement from Board members for such training has been an issue for us just like it has been for other iwi groups. Through our involvement in CEDAR and the questioning stimulated by the CEDAR researchers, we were able to challenge ourselves and revisit the how and why of undertaking such training. We have since come up with a different approach to training and a different process so as to achieve focus on iwi priorities when Board members are elected. This has been very useful learning for us.” (General Manager, Ngati Kahungunu Iwi Incorporated)

### The Issue of Timing

The policy cycle operates to a different time frame to that of research, so that often by the time information is generated from the community, analysed, made sense of and captured for policy, policy has moved onto something else. Our ability to influence the policy paper on volunteering was due to the fact that there was a match – policy teams were considering this issue at the same time that CEDAR researchers identified the issue in Twizel. However, this match in timing did not occur at all stages of the project. At other times, CEDAR contributed to conceptual change (Weiss 1977), a process in which the information influences the terms of the debate and how the policy makers see the world, rather than to direct instrumental change.

### The Issue of Boundary

Policy issues are complex and interdependent and often cut across different institutional boundaries. Through CEDAR, we often identified policy issues that fell within the accountability lines of other government agencies. For instance, in Twizel, which has a seasonal tourist economy, the interface between the social welfare benefit system and the tax system emerged as an important barrier for part-time workers and others on welfare to move into full-time work. The mismatch in timing and calculations of the Ministry of Social Development and Inland Revenue meant that some individuals had to pay back tax to Inland Revenue in the winter, when they were unemployed. However, this significant policy issue was outside the scope of the Department of Labour, although it was an important issue facing employers in the tourism sector.

The challenge for the CEDAR team was to feed these emerging issues into the policy debate among government departments in a constructive way. The CEDAR team did this by actively scanning the wider policy arena for opportunities and forums and then got these community-driven issues onto the agenda, thereby respecting our commitment to the community to get their voices into the policy-making process. Concerning the benefit–tax interface issue in Twizel, the CEDAR team met with relevant policy teams in the Department of Labour and the Ministry of Social Development to discuss the issue, identify what policy work was already in place to respond to this issue and connect with WINZ<sup>5</sup> work brokers in the region to help Twizel employers understand the issue and respond to their need for workers in the high season.

However, this process was hugely resource-intensive and presented project management challenges that were unanticipated. This is likely to be an ongoing challenge and dilemma for any government engagement effort for two reasons.

- The terms of engagement cannot be fully identified at the beginning, and once the process has been initiated it will take the agency into territories that are beyond a government agency’s understanding or scope.
- The core principles of engagement such as mutual trust, reciprocity and commitment to the process mean that one cannot pull out of the engagement.

This “way of working” is now becoming more widely accepted within the Department of Labour, which is keen to move beyond traditional consultative processes to active engagement with the target populations. Its Pure Business project, initiated in 2003, is an illustration of government partnering with businesses in order to resolve issues that impede their growth. In 2004 the Department set up the Work Opportunities Group, the core work of which is regional and sector engagement aimed at “interacting with others in a meaningful way on an initiative, policy or some other activity to help achieve common goals. It is a way of working with and through others as a means to realising results”.

The Small Business Support Group set up as part of the Workplace Group of the Department of Labour is yet another signal of the Department’s commitment to working with end users to collectively identify solutions. While this is an exciting development, the CEDAR team would like to caution that sustaining this level of engagement is resource-intensive and therefore expansion into this area must be carefully considered.

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5 Now Work and Income, a service of the Ministry of Social Development.

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