

## **BOOK REVIEW**

### **KNOWLEDGE PARTNERING FOR COMMUNITY DEVELOPMENT – ROBYN EVERSOLE (ROUTLEDGE 2015)**

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Given the arguably plateaued state of regional science and regional studies in Australasia, any new local book on regional development is welcome. The publication of a book that is written by the director of one of our few remaining university-based centres dedicated for regional development is especially welcome. Many of our top ranking and prolific scholars seem to have simply moved on to other areas of research, have retired, have found their bases of support within our universities no longer there, or (much more worrying), have run out of things to say about Australasian regions or lost the desire to say them.

It has been said more than once that regional collaboration is “an unnatural act between non-consenting adults”. Collaboration across regions has to overcome plenty of barriers – the limiting, KPI driven, corporatising world of local government, and of universities; regional boundaries set by distant governments that (perhaps) reflect history or administrative convenience but not necessarily current communities of interest or functional economic areas; the waxing and waning of interest from central governments, and indeed from local councils, whose interest in, and capacity to deliver, local economic development may well have peaked in Australasia; volunteer burnout; the inevitable and now documented churn of population that often sees good people leave communities; and a chronic lack of financial resources that lead communities into the vicious cycle of chasing funding and then spending it on administration.

Community development, and community economic development in particular, has assumed considerable importance in Australia and elsewhere, in policy and in practice, since the 1980s. The policy buzz words of the

1990s included, prominently, “partnerships” and “leadership”, though these often remained ill-defined notions, they were, nonetheless, useful to politicians and others. These have given way in the 2010s to what is perhaps the regional development buzz word of all buzz words, “collaboration”. Along the way, we have had concepts such as “learning regions”, “regional innovation systems”, the “knowledge economy”, the “associational economy”, “asset based development”, the various “capitals”, asset based community development, and much more besides (see for example, Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993; Morgan and Cooke, 1998; and Cocklin and Dibden, 2005).

We now have the notion of “regional collaborative advantage”. And this is real, and is important. Community development is a people business, as indeed is broader regional development. The importance of what Doug Henton and others termed “civic entrepreneurship” back in the 1990s has long been recognised in the field (Henton *et al.* 1997). New terms, such as “boundary crossers”, who work between the silos of sectors, localities and interest groups, merely describe old realities. The boundary crossers are, in effect the “grassroots leaders” of Henton’s 1990s conception of quiet movers and shakers who get things done in towns and regions, floating between economy and community.

The emergence of the openly networked world of 21<sup>st</sup> century regional economies, so well described by “pracademics” like Ed Morrison of Purdue University in Indiana, reflects what many in the field have known for some time (Morrison, 2012). In Morrison’s schema, making connections is critical to success. Building trust is the only basis for effective collaborations. We work best with those we know and like. We don’t need permission to work together.

Morrison and his peers have led the development of methodologies such as “strategic doing”, which show communities how to do community development, how to do the visioning, how to define goals, how to implement action plans – and how to do this quickly. Other methodologies have emerged too, such as “appreciative inquiry”, “collective impact”, “investment logic mapping” and “intervention mapping”. Overall, “capacity building” has become embedded in strategy for community development, sometimes to the point of cliché.

All this practical advice is helpful for what are often stretched and stressed communities and the professionals who work in and with them.

And so, in the same way, is Robyn Eversole's book *Knowledge Partnering for Community Development* extremely helpful (Eversole, 2015).

The book is, in effect, a primer on the whole field of community development as it is known to us in 2015. Eversole comes from the community development field of regional studies. Her long term career interest and the focus of her scholarship have generally been on the ways that people and institutions interact in communities, most especially in rural communities. Her disciplinary focus is anthropology and ethnography, and these have taken her to the world of community development theory and practice, the world of such scholars as Norman Walzer of Northern Illinois University and Jan Flora of Iowa State. Her interests and sources of knowledge are not confined to Australasia, nor to Western communities. She has drawn broadly and deeply from both the Australasian and international literature and case studies. The book reflects serious scholarship.

Her interests are global and her concerns – poverty, disadvantage, hunger, inequality, social exclusion – are not merely economic. Yet Eversole has drawn too, on the literature of local economic development, and she recognises that functioning communities must attend to matters of investment and employment. She also demonstrates how the evolving theory and practice of economic development has influenced thinking and practice in international community development more broadly. She has long had an interest in micro-businesses and micro-lending, especially in the context of village economics in emerging nations.

This is, then, very much a cross disciplinary work.

She believes, correctly, that often communities do “development” best when they face serious, even existential crises. The book also reflects a deep appreciation of the history of community development, and has a good and informative discussion of the evolution of theory, policy and practice in the field. She understands that development is complex and often not susceptible of control. She also wisely understands and records the limits of “partnerships”.

At the core of the argument and of the book is the centrality of knowledge in place-based development. Eversole is an advocate of using knowledge partnerships to drive better and higher engagement in and with community in the task of development. Her typologies of knowledge are reminiscent of

differentiations of varying types of social capital, following Putnam, and different types of knowledge (tacit and codified), following Michael Polanyi and others (Putnam, 2000; Polanyi, 1958). Ewersole's four types of partnerships – project partnerships, funding partnerships, strategic partnerships, and governance partnerships – add a new and illuminating dimension to earlier thinking about the following levels of collaboration:

- Mutual awareness (the lowest);
- Learning exchange;
- Sharing resources;
- Co-execution; and
- Innovating together or co-creation (the highest; the five layers are sometimes rendered thus – networking; cooperation; coordination; coalition; and collaboration; see Hogue 1993).

Of course, that there is much low level collaboration in community and economic development, and not so much at the higher levels, is a cause of ongoing frustration for many a practitioner operating in these fields. Putting Ewersole's types of partnerships together with the above noted levels or stages of partnership, might provide a highly useful schema for assessing a region's or community's collaborative advantage (or disadvantage). Given the reality of the increasingly open-networked economy and society that we now have, and the challenges that this poses for regional strategy implementation, such a joining up would be highly suggestive and valuable.

There is also something of Frans Johansson's thinking about innovation as the intersection of different cultures and disciplines in Ewersole's transformative solutions through bringing different kinds of knowledge together (Johansson, 2006). This is a key insight that is, arguably, critical for innovation and for successful community partnering. In addition, Ewersole usefully dissects the whole notion of community "participation". (Those who have laboured within government may have doubted the genuineness of the commitment of governments to community participation, despite the lip-service given to it).

As an aspiration for community development, knowledge partnering is unexceptional and, indeed, essential if development efforts are to be remotely

successful. For example, knowing, framing and (where necessary) reconciling community members' potentially very different ways of conceiving "what we are trying to achieve" through "community" and "development".

But is knowledge partnering a realistic aspiration for real communities? The fear is that a community's desire to do x, if it can be articulated, will often be derailed, not just by turf protection, egos and "creative differences" among participants, but also and perhaps more importantly by more systemic barriers to knowledge partnering at a local and regional scale. It is at least reasonable to argue that the progressive marginalisation of local government by state governments in Australia, the relentless advance of corporatisation, the increasing managerialism of local councils and the tendency to reduce development to the quest for government funding, have all conspired to render genuine bottom up, implementation-driven community development limp and ineffective. These are serious challenges to a community's capacity for knowledge partnering. In particular, the community sector's client relationship with central government funding agencies and its hand-to-mouth existence tend to consume the genuine efforts of civic entrepreneurs and wear them down. Perhaps the emergence of crowdsourcing and new digital platforms useful for link-and-leverage strategies might provide a way out for the under-resourced and under-strategised community.

I wonder if "overcoming the systemic barriers – or simply the barriers – to effective knowledge partnering" might be the missing chapter in Eversole's book.

Eversole's book is really part text book and part tool kit, with a structure that accommodates further readings and boxed "practical applications", and is therefore pitched squarely to students and practitioners. I especially found rewarding the chapter on the innovative practitioner, and in particular the notion of knowledge brokering. Eversole does a very good job of summarising a whole lot of knowledge about practice and the experience of doing community development in a way that informs theory. The bases are well and truly covered, with scholarship, style and substance. The book is highly readable, highly informative, and highly recommended.

Does the book break new ground? Does it go beyond being a very up-to-date and very comprehensive synthesis, itself an admirable achievement? This can be debated. And I for one am not sufficiently across the community development literature to make a fully informed judgement on this (and I am

certainly not well versed in the development studies literature). And does a “primer”, in any case, have to break new ground? Let me tentatively say, though, that Ewersole has well and truly opened the door to an important debate on the nature of communities, the realities of community development, the challenges faced, and the importance of knowledge sharing (high level collaboration), both as a methodology and as a pointer to success. And I am not aware that this has been done before, done this well, and done in this way. It stands worthily among the very good books written by Australasian regional studies scholars.

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