

Tenant Participation, Social Housing and Democracy: Tensions between expectations and realities

> *Dr Dallas Rogers summarises themes from the Annual Marg Barry Memorial Lecture 2012, as presented by himself at Redfern Town Hall in December 2012.*

To read the full transcript or to hear the audio from the lecture, visit <http://www.innersydney.org.au/our-projects/annual-marg-barry-memorial-lecture/#.URrOAlqyA0>

Introduction

Back in the early 1970s – when Marg Barry and others were establishing community coalitions to advocate for improved housing conditions for Sydney’s low income families, the frail and elderly, and those with disabilities – there was certainly no requirement for government to involve local resident groups in housing matters. “That all changed” argued the Honourable Deirdre Grusovin (2001:1) when resident action groups “challenged government and organised community resistance” to a government policy of slum clearance in the New South Wales suburb of Waterloo in 1976.

This shows that, long before the government and non-government housing providers created formal tenant participation strategies, the residents of low income households were creating their own more informal participation processes to advocate for better housing outcomes. However, from the early 2000s, two key changes have altered how tenants might participate in the governance of their housing.

Dr Rogers has researched tenant participation with tenant advocates in Australia, UK and USA. Dr Rogers is pictured here with tenant leaders in South Chicago, USA.

The first change was the move from public housing provided by a state housing authority toward a model of social housing provision delivered by the community housing sector (Rogers, 2010; 2012b). The second was a move to formalise tenant participation as a set of policies and practices within the government and then the non-government housing sectors (NSW Department of Housing, 1986; St George Community Housing Limited, 2009).

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We can think about the newer, more formalised, tenant participation processes and the older resident action groups as two distinct types of tenant participation. The newer type is the one that we now commonly associate with tenant participation, and includes processes such as tenant consultations, tenant committees, tenant advisory groups and the like. The second type is a much older form of tenant participation that involves tenant-driven community organising.



There is a need for both types of tenant participation because tenants can advocate for a broader range of outcomes through more informal tenant organising efforts than can be achieved through the formalised tenant participation processes set up by housing managers alone. By focusing in on this distinction, this article highlights three key tensions that arise when tenants enter their housing managers' formalised tenant participation processes and then the democratic realities of these processes fall short of their expectations. It is local level democracy that is at stake within tenant participation (Rogers, 2012a).

Is tenant participation a right or an action?

So, to start, let's be clear about local level democracy: A very important and foundational component of democracy is that everybody – rich and poor – has the right to participate in local governance. This often translates in housing policy into terms such as social inclusion, which is premised on notions of local level democracy. Using the language of social inclusion, we frequently hear people say it's the tenants' right to participate in their housing management, and here lies the first tension.

Should we think about tenant participation as a right because tenants are citizens of Australia and members of their housing community? Or should we think about tenant participation as an action – something that only makes sense or means something when tenants are undertaking an action by voting, submitting a public submission, sitting on a tenant committee, attending a safety audit or, dare I say, even protesting?

“*Tenants involved in my studies wanted to discuss the broader social and market context as well as their local housing issues...*”

The move from government (public) to non-government (social) housing management creates a problem for the idea of tenant participation as a constitutional right that is enabled as a result of tenants being citizens of Australia (Rancière, 2000; Mouffe, 2005). Within former welfare states, such as Australia, tenants' constitutional rights were initially established as the right to social security and, therefore, as a right to public housing protection. But, with the move from public to social housing provision, tenants' constitutional rights have been detached from their rights to housing protection. So, tenants' rights have changed because tenants can no longer hold the government to account in the ways they could when the government was their housing manager.

As a result of all this, the actions of tenants are very important because their rights are changing with the move from public to social housing management. This is because non-government housing managers cannot grant the same rights to tenants as the government, and this means that tenants now have to lobby the government for some of their housing needs and their non-government housing managers for other needs. To better understand this tension, I will outline the difference between tenant participation processes and the importance of the broader social context (Cornwall, 2004).

Participation tools versus social context

For some time now, academics and practitioners have been interested in developing effective tenant participation policy.

They have sought to develop 'best practice models' for tenant participation, and there are now some fairly rigorous models and policies that are meeting the needs of non-government housing managers.

While these policies outline the types of activities (actions) that tenants can undertake, they do not always provide the full spectrum of political activities that tenants need to advocate for their housing needs. In other words, while tenant participation policy might be meeting the needs of the non-government housing managers, these policies do not always meet the needs of tenants.

What is missing from these tenant participation policies is the way – the method or the process – through which these processes of local-level democracy will be incorporated into a system of representative democracy. What is missing is how tenants can act to inform the broader social and political context through which their housing management is being provided – it is this context that is key. Being socially excluded from the broader political discussions about social housing provision can create a huge tension between expectations and realities for tenants (Mouffe, 2005).

Tenants involved in my studies wanted to discuss the broader social and market context, as well as their local housing issues. Sure, there might be formal requirements for social housing providers to undertake tenant participation at the local level but tenants often reported that they can't discuss or be involved in decisions about, for instance, the move from public to social housing or the forced relocation of public tenants.

Tenants told me they could only discuss local issues, such as maintenance or small changes within predetermined policy frameworks, and not the governments' policy frameworks themselves. So tenants want to talk about both – they want to be involved in the formal tenant participation processes with their social housing managers but they also want to be involved in the wider political debates that directly affect their lives. In short, tenants want and should be able to set their own participation agendas (Rogers, 2012a).

Tenant versus housing manager agendas

Tenants that I've talked to want to set the agenda for tenant participation because this allows for a wider framing of the issues that concern tenants. This leads to the questions: who should manage tenant participation? Which organisations should be tasked with the job? How should they be funded? And what government bodies should be involved and how?

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We can think about this as requiring the two different types of tenant participation processes that were outlined in the introduction, and the need to revitalise the older forms of tenant participation that involve tenant-driven community organising.

This is a form of tenant participation that is solely managed by tenants or their representatives and has no – or very little – housing manager control or input. For tenants to effectively advocate for change, they need independent tenant groups. By referring to ‘independent’, I mean no strings attached to funding.

“ An urgent task is to rethink the funding mechanisms that support independent tenant groups... ”

Independent tenant groups need to be free to question government decisions – free to talk to politicians and the media – and to have free access to information about government and non-government housing policy, and the actions of governments and housing managers. Consequently, it is inappropriate and outside the core business of the non-government housing managers to facilitate these types of tenant participation activities.

An urgent task is to rethink the funding mechanisms that support independent tenant groups. At present, local level funding is largely directed at housing managers’ tenant participation programs and not toward the support or establishment of independent tenant groups (*Cornwall, 2004; Mouffe, 2005; Rogers, 2010*).

Conclusion

The government and non-government housing managers are developing effective tenant participation policies to meet the ‘good governance’ requirements of their organisations. While there are benefits to these tenant participation policies for housing managers and tenants, there will always be tenant questions and concerns that cannot be pursued through these processes.

While not placing the importance of one participation process over another, tenants need a multitude of participation activities that will meet their diverse political needs. The commitment by housing managers to develop tenant participation policies is a necessary process of good governance for housing managers. For tenants, however, it has to be one of many ways through which they can participate in a network of independent tenant participation processes that span the local to the national.

We need both housing manager and tenant-driven processes if we want to start bridging the gap between expectations and realities for tenants. Going to a local politician, the media or even protesting might be just as important to tenants as an act of tenant participation as going to a community consultation or being involved in a tenant committee that has been established by their housing manager.

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Dallas has undertaken research projects with local and state government partners and conducted resident participation appraisals for public, private and non-government housing providers. He is currently an Australian Urban and Housing Research Institute (AHURI) Post-Doctoral Fellow at the University of Western Sydney.