

Landcare as an Exploration of Means of Implementing the Principle of Subsidiarity

Michael T. Seigel

A. THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY

- first articulated in 1931 in response to the rise of Fascism, Stalin regime, Nazism
- Originated as a principal of the social teaching of the Catholic Church
- adopted as a guiding principal by the European Union.

1. A positive or negative principle?

- Negative Interpretation: decentralisation, devolution of power (small government):
central governments → regional governments → local governments
→ individuals, communities and groups

2. Original statement of the principle

- “Just as it is gravely wrong to take from individuals what they can accomplish by their own initiative and industry and give it to the community, so also it is an injustice and at the same time a grave evil and disturbance of right order to assign to a greater and higher association what lesser and subordinate organizations can do. For every social activity ought of its very nature to *furnish help to the members of the body social*, and never destroy and absorb them” (emphasis added).

“Subsidiarity”

- “Subsidiarity” is derived from the Latin “subsidium” (“help, relief; reinforcement”). Not just about levels of decision making; a positive role of strengthening and empowering, individuals, groups and communities.

3. A hierarchical principle?

- Example: The 1957 intervention of the U.S. federal government to desegregate schools in Little Rock, Arkansas. 1954 the Supreme Court required all schools in U.S. to integrate → 1957, the governor of the state of Arkansas deployed the Arkansas National Guard to physical block the entry of black students into school → federal government sends in troops to enforce integration and protect the black students.

A hierarchical principle? (2)

- This is inconsistent with decentralisation and small government but highly consistent with subsidiarity.
- The principle of subsidiarity is about *optimal* support for the grassroots, the small-scale, the local from whichever level of society can best provide it.

4. Grounding of the Principle

- grounded in a view of the human being
 - as having the capacity and right to be in charge of their own lives
 - but at the same time sees them as being essentially oriented towards relatedness
- It refers to *autonomy and connectedness—help that supports and enables but does not take over or override*

- applies particularly to the various kinds of communities (family, life communities such as villages and towns, interest groups, etc.) that people form naturally
- Organised society exists to serve the individual and these natural groupings. It should never override or displace them.

Some Examples of the Principle at Work

- Development and poverty eradication: removing impediments, making resources and opportunities available for people who then take control of their own development vs. approaches that try to bring solutions.
- Conflict resolution: (e.g., the Nonviolent Peaceforce) creates a venue for conflicting parties to negotiate a solution themselves.
- Treatment of addiction: groups modelled on Alcoholics Anonymous have no rules, instructions, teachers or counsellors, just the experience of others to learn from. Each individual decides for themselves what they learn.

Poverty, conflict, addiction are all intractable problems that have defied the efforts of experts. Success shows what can be achieved when autonomy is combined with connectedness.

II. LANDCARE AND THE PRINCIPLE OF SUBSIDIARITY

- No manual for implementing the principle. Experience may be helpful.
- There are few experiences involving governments over a significant duration. Landcare in Australia during the Decade of Landcare may be the best, if not the only example.
- There are two major lessons to be learned from Landcare

1. The role of networking and partnership

- Landcare has shown the value of networking and partnerships of local groups with the various levels of government, with academic institutions, experts, businesses, NGOs, etc., and also of networking among Landcare groups themselves
- It has shown the cross-fertilisation of ideas and practices, clarification of thinking and understanding, and the empowerment that this brings.
- Landcare provides a model whereby connectedness can be achieved without sacrificing autonomy.
- It has shown how this can be achieved through a system of facilitators and coordinators.

Creating a feedback loop

- Landcare has shown the need for a feedback loop where the voices of the smallest scale and most local levels can be made to be heard at decision-making levels.
- The example of Little Rock Arkansas: a result of the activities of Daisy Bates and the Little Rock chapter of the NAACP. It was a liaison between the federal government, the local council, and a local community group.
- Without this upward process from the grassroots level informing, conscientising and pressuring the decision making levels of society, a real implementation of the principle of subsidiarity may not be possible.

CONCLUSION

- The processes of Landcare need to be thoroughly studied as do the ebbs and flows in the attitudes towards and support for Landcare from the state and federal governments.
- This will help the international spread of Landcare, is very likely to be of use to people working in other areas, and may help us to find a way beyond the stultified state that democracy is in.