

Academic Fellows Program

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Relational Public Management and the Social Economy

Professor Jo Barraket, University of Melbourne

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What are the issue/s?

In an era of complexity and polycrisis, partnerships, co-governance and cross-sector collaboration have never been more important to the effective design, procurement and delivery of social and territorial policy programs. Yet, recent public service reviews (e.g. Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2019) and academic literature e.g. (Bartels & Turnbull, 2020; Bode et al., 2003; Considine, 2022; O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Rommel & Verhoest, 2014; Roy et al., 2025) consistently point to limitations in the capabilities, systems and institutional cultures that are required in and across sectors to work effectively in these ways.

While different forms of relational public governance and management involve a broad range of non-government actors¹, social economy organisations – comprising not-for-profits, cooperatives, mutuals and social enterprise (Lyons, 2001) – often play novel roles in co-creating public value as service providers, systems intermediaries and boundary spanners because of their relational skills and connections with the communities they serve (Barraket et al., 2021; Bode et al., 2003; Park & Wilding, 2014; Roy et al., 2025). Yet, these organisations also often lack formal authority or legitimacy needed within public services systems to maximise the potential public value of their contributions (Barraket et al., 2021; Roy et al., 2025). New Public Management (NPM) practices, such as government outsourcing and creation of quasi-markets in social services provision, have also arguably eroded the novel contributions of the social economy through competitive procurement approaches and homogenisation of services standards that privilege transactional over relational ways of working (Carmel & Harlock, 2008; Considine, 2022; O'Sullivan et al., 2021; Wilson et al., 2024).

Current government activities – such as the trialling of relational contracting by Australia's Commonwealth Government Department of Social Services, the adoption of Indigenous and social procurement policies across multiple jurisdictions within and beyond Australia, and the standards of co-governance and shared decision-making embedded in the National Agreement on Closing the Gap (Commonwealth of Australia, Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2020) – suggest some purposeful movement towards relational public governance and management. To realise the rhetoric of relationality, however, requires new (or revived) norms, skills, and instruments of the public sector.

Why does this matter?

NPM practices over 30 years have hollowed out public sector capabilities (Rhodes, 1994) and emphasised consumer choice over citizen voice (Considine, 2022; Wilson et al., 2024) in the design and delivery of public services. As governments seek to overcome the decline in citizens' trust in public institutions and adopt policy instruments that rely on the active participation and/or capital of non-government actors in their implementation, both government and non-

¹ Including citizens themselves (Osborne et al., 2016, 2021)

government capabilities for relational work need to increase. This issue is practically and conceptually important. Practically, both government and relevant non-government actors need to develop new ways of working together, which requires learning together. However, current development opportunities tend to remain siloed by sectors or largely controlled by one (typically government), which does not result in the co-learning needed for change. Conceptually, research and researchers who focus on these matters tend to align to theoretical frameworks and practical examples that are either government-led or social economy/industry-led, with very little research being developed at the true intersections between sectors. This means existing explanatory frameworks are also siloed and thus not fully fit for purpose.

There is a growing need for practical approaches that help public sector leaders build, sustain and govern effective relationships across organisational and sector boundaries. Yet relatively little guidance exists on what relational public management looks like in practice, or the capabilities required to support it.

Responding to these gaps, this fellowship seeks to contribute to new learning within and between public sector and social economy professionals who are engaged in social policy activities and reforms that rely on and/or seek to increase relationality as a condition of their success. In so doing, it is hoped this work can modestly contribute to building the capabilities and cultures needed for more effective relational public governance and management.

The approach

Drawing on current and recent research I have led, which examines relations between the social economy and governments in inclusive procurement and employment services systems², the fellowship will share findings and invite feedback from ANZSOG colleagues and networks to both disseminate knowledge and invite further sensemaking of findings from public sector practitioners via two multi-jurisdictional online workshops. Where appropriate to facilitate co-learning through the process, relevant social economy leaders involved in the research will also contribute to these discussions and sensemaking activities. Informed by these discussions and learning from these research projects, the fellowship will develop and disseminate at least one output for public sector professionals about effective approaches to relational public management. This output will synthesise lessons from research and practitioner discussions into practical guidance for public sector leaders seeking to strengthen collaboration, trust, shared decision-making and cross-sector partnerships in the design and delivery of public services. I also hope through this process to identify possibilities for a more 'joined-up' applied research agenda to strengthen relational public governance and management involving governments and the social economy.

Impact into practice

The purpose of this fellowship is to open up new conversations, coalitions and co-learning in support of better relational public management involving governments and the social economy. It is hoped that the fellowship activities and outputs will: enable new or improved relational public management practices within the public sector and social economy; and stimulate new practice and research relationships that address common challenges and goals in this area.

Through this process, the fellowship aims to generate practical insights that support public sector leaders to work effectively across government, community and social economy organisations.

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Resources

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