Intro:

Welcome to the GovComms Podcast, bringing you the latest insights and innovations from experts and thought leaders around the globe in government communication. Now, here is your host, David Pembroke.

David Pembroke:

Hello everyone and welcome back to the Collective Engagement for Social Purpose Podcast, which is a collaboration between GovComms and the University of Adelaide's Dr. Taylor Willmott and Professor Jodie Conduit. Today's episode is the fifth of a six-part series where we share the wisdom and insights from a multi-year, multi-phase Australian Research -Council funded discovery project. Now, if you are yet to listen to the previous episodes from this series, we recommend that you go back to the beginning. Episodes three and four are fantastic conversations with The Obesity Collective's Tiffany Petre, and Orange Sky's Lucas Patchett. Both Tiffany and Lucas know firsthand what it takes to bring together a diverse group of people to tackle social causes and to create sustainable change. So, we recommend giving those episodes a listen for some inspiration, and also the first episodes one through four, are also available to be downloaded from your favourite podcast streaming platform.

So today we're joined by Ingo Karpen. Ingo is a Professor of Business and Design at the University of Adelaide and Karlstad University in Sweden. And Karlstad is between, smack bang between Stockholm and Oslo. Ingo has a passion for making lives and systems better, and he seeks to engage with researchers and entrepreneurs to create positive social change in different contexts. Ingo is a Chief Investigator on the Collective Engagement for Social Purpose Project, and together with Dr. Taylor Willmott, will share with us today some insights from the team's interviews with 35 community engagement managers from the various social purpose organisations that the team has spoken to.

The theme for today's discussion is human connection and relationships, and specifically, Ingo and Taylor will talk about the role of compassion in collectively engaging a group of people to achieve a shared social purpose. So, to begin, let me welcome Ingo Karpen all the way from Karlstad in Sweden. Ingo, welcome to the podcast.

Ingo Karpen:

Thank you so much, David. Pleasure to be here.

David Pembroke:

And Taylor, welcome back to you to the podcast once again.

Dr. Taylor Willmott:

Thanks for having me back, David. I'm looking forward to today's discussion.

David Pembroke:

Okay, so listen, given that you are the constant so far and we've been following this process, before we get to Ingo and sort of to delve into some of the discovery, what's happened since we last spoke? Where is the project up to and how is it progressing?

Dr. Taylor Willmott:

Yeah, so we're towards the end of our analysis of the 35 interviews that we've conducted with community engagement and social enterprise managers across Australia. So, we're working now to kind of bring everything together in a way in which we can look at sharing with the wider community. And today's episode, we hope to be able to share one of the main insights that have come out of our analysis. Ingo and I have been working in parallel to analyse the interview data that we have. And as you mentioned, the role of human connections and relationships has played quite a large role in our discussions around collective engagement and how we can foster collective engagement and what mechanisms bring engagement at the individual level and transition that to the collective engagement that we really do need in order to affect change.

David Pembroke:

Okay. Well, listen, before we jump into the detail, we know all about you Taylor because we've spoken to you many times, but Ingo, we don't know you. How about you just give us the Ingo Karpen story, the potted history, and how is it that you've found yourself in this very interesting line of work?

Ingo Karpen:

Sounds good, thanks David. I'm at the University of Adelaide, but at the same time I'm also at Karlstad University in Sweden. And I've been always interested in trying to make a difference and really been focused on understanding phenomena that matter to human beings, that really make a difference to human beings. It's no surprise that in my line of work, we also have been now working towards understanding how collectively we can make a difference in society. And I try to combine both my academic head with my practitioner head and bring interdisciplinary areas together, for example, across a discipline that might be called human-centred design, but also combine this with business insights. Because at the end of the day, many of these social entrepreneurs or social enterprises, they need to survive too while making a difference. And this often requires an interdisciplinary approach which I am seeking to engage in with the work that I do.

David Pembroke:

So listen, in a social purpose context, can you briefly explain the importance of human connection and relationships in collective engagement?

Ingo Karpen:

Absolutely. Many of the things that matter most in life actually sit between people, not just within people. Consider, for example, trust or love, but also phenomena such as humour or tragedy. Many of these things matter most when they are shared. The relationships become really a vehicle where this sharing takes place, where compassion can emerge. The relationships and the connections between people is really an important phenomenon for both our study but also in practice for the people that want to make a difference on a daily basis when helping people on diverse courses, whether that is related to phenomena such as homelessness or obesity or it's really about connecting with the people that experience some form of tragedy, pain, suffering, and building there these connections that can make a difference in their lives.

David Pembroke:

Now we all collectively shared sort of the COVID-19 pandemic and it really was a good example of a shared human experience and really the importance of compassion to deliver, I suppose, collective well-being. What did you observe through that period that struck you about the importance of this need to be aware of others and to be thoughtful and compassionate about others?

Ingo Karpen:

COVID has been an extreme situation for humanity, for people around the globe. We had to isolate, we were forced to engage in entirely new practices that are actually not core to the nature of who we are and what we are in life. And especially this phenomena of isolating, for example, and not having the chance to access family members, people that we usually hang out with, not being able to access the energies of these people has been a really difficult phenomenon. And it's been astonishing to see how communities have tried to make a difference by finding ways in these difficult times to both on one hand, understand the type of difficult experiences that we go through as a collective, but also individuals, whether that is individual family members or friends in our circles, and on the other hand find ways to alleviate some of those stressors that we together and individually have experienced during COVID.

Compassion has been in that environment a really beautiful element that has made a difference by seeking to understand, appreciate, and recognise the type of challenges we as human beings experience in these difficult times and finding ways to alleviate those painful and stressful moments.

David Pembroke:

So Ingo, to you, and this might seem like an unusual question, but I think in some ways it's an unusual not very used word, compassion. What is compassion?

Ingo Karpen:

That is very true, and I wish we would speak more often about compassion both in society but also in academia. There are disciplines where compassion plays a really critical role and has been for a long time, for example, in a nursing context. But when it comes to social change and whether it's the business discipline, there is far less talk of compassion. Often we look at charts, figures, we're interested in performance indicators, we try to assess the way we have performed in various ways, but often we don't put enough primacy on the human beings involved. We see compassion in this case as a combination on one hand of creating awareness for the suffering or pain of people, but also at the same time having a desire to make a difference and alleviate or eliminate some of that pain or suffering. So, it's a really fundamental phenomenon in society that can make a difference on a daily basis.

David Pembroke:

So Taylor, to you, how does compassion differ from let's say empathy or say sympathy? How is it different?

Dr. Taylor Willmott:

Yeah, so I think Ingo hit the nail on the head when he spoke about the action component of compassion and that motivational desire to alleviate a pain or a suffering that you've become aware of in others. So, it's moving beyond self for the benefit of others. I think if you look at sympathy for example, it's a reaction to the plight of others. It might be feeling sorry for another person's hurt or pain, but there's some emotional distancing when you experience sympathy for others. You're not actually experiencing their pain, but you were saying that you understand their hurt. Empathy is one step, I guess above empathy, but it's still not at the level that compassion is and it doesn't have that action component. With empathy, you have the ability to experience someone else's pain and have their feeling of hurt or suffering, but it doesn't ... It's not coupled with the desire or the motivation to help or alleviate that feeling that you are able to experience.

David Pembroke:

That's very clear now that we understand that in compassion there are those two things. There is not only the awareness, but there is that action, that desire to do something. So, Ingo, understanding compassion, what role does it play in collectively engaging and motivating people for a shared social purpose?

Ingo Karpen:

That's a great question, David. And actually, I would like to have a quick go on helping us have a shared understanding of actually collective engagement as well, because I think that's really important too. And I try to put that in really simple terms rather than using too much of an academic language. For me, collective engagement or engaging the collective, the community, is really about getting people on board. It's about people having skin in the game. And in this case, compassion can really make a difference on helping getting people on board.

Because on one hand, if we find ways to help people in the community recognise the suffering of our community members by making it really tangible, for example, providing stories or real insights that help people to see, and potentially even feel the journey that some of our community members have been on, so by creating this awareness for the pain or for the potentially even tragic life experiences, this awareness can then help in translating, into building emotional connections to individuals, but also to a collective cause that helps to alleviate the pain that is being experienced. Compassion really is a very powerful element in helping us as a community to engage around a purpose that really wants to make a difference to the lives of people.

David Pembroke:

How do we, Ingo, engage people in such a way that they will take action at a time when people are busy, people have got their own lives, they've got their own challenges? How do we make people aware and encourage them to take action? What are the ways that you can do that and do that effectively and overcome the inertia or indeed in some cases perhaps the resistance to want to try to make a difference?

Ingo Karpen:

So we saw a lot of different actions and activities that the organisations engage in, and many of the organisations or entrepreneurs do these things quite intuitively. And I just want to give a few examples of the many beautiful stories that we've heard, and actions that were taken. And I think one of the things that really make a difference in terms of getting people on board has to do, again, with tangibility, making the suffering tangible. And whether this happens through enabling members of the communities to tell their story, for example, is a really important element in this case, finding ways to make the voices that are not typically heard, enabling them to tell their story is one way that is really critical. On the other hand, this idea of making things tangible also has to do with outcomes. Consider for example, if you are donating blood and once your blood has been used to support a patient in a hospital and you receive an SMS, for example, that your blood has been used and has made a difference to people's lives, that can actually be really touching.

It really becomes a reinforcing circle when on one hand we can see suffering of others, but we also tangibly can feel or are aware of how our own action has made a difference to the lives of others. Tangibility is one element. Another area that we saw frequently employed by these organisations had to do with the idea of empowering people. And on one hand this empowerment of people could manifest, for example, in ensuring that people on the front line, people who go out and speak with community members who are present, who do the conversations with homeless people, et cetera, that these people have the resources at hand so that they can react rather quickly or immediately and can respond in a way that makes a difference.

But empowerment is not just related to volunteers or other staff members who are actually on the front line, but empowerment can also go as far as inviting people in the community itself to contribute to the social cause. And sometimes organisations might invite here community members to submit photos regarding a specific cause that can stimulate further discussion, debate about a specific phenomenon, for example. Or we might invite community members to actually join forums where we discuss and bring to life different issues in the community that are directly related to the cause and seek ways in co-design workshops, for example, to work towards addressing these issues together.

David Pembroke:

So Ingo, in terms of the feedback that you did have from the 35 community engagement managers, how would you sum up the mood of those managers? Were they feeling optimistic, were they feeling like they were making progress or were they at the other end of the scale, feeling a bit sort of downtrodden and not able or not feeling motivated that they are making a difference even though they're applying their best effort every day?

Ingo Karpen:

I have been absolutely amazed on one hand by the beautiful work that they have been doing and also by the positivity that we have encountered in these conversations because lots of these organisations deal with really difficult human experiences. There's a lot of suffering and a lot of also mental support required by their team members or staff members. It's been absolutely incredible to hear both the stamina that these people have and the positivity that they still bring to the table. Of course, many of these organisations also face important challenges such as finite resources. There are lots of organisations that try to get access to relevant funding at the same time. Some of these organisations might even compete in some sense for resources, but we've seen some of the most beautiful results actually when CEOs or directors or leaders in these organisations actually have put their ego aside.

I have to say that really a critical element was when people actually put not themselves first from these organisations, but put the people first who they actually serve and find ways, for example, just simply picking up the phone and trying to organise a joint event or a joint activity with another organisation that is directly related where you might think, "Well, technically they might be competing," but the best results come out when these organisations actually start to collaborate. And we see this also that this positivity is justified in many ways because of the touching stories, the touching results that they achieve. And this does not only manifest in the daily human conversations that are happening on the frontline, but we can also see it in the big data. When we look at the amount of hours spent in conversations with homeless people or in washings that have been offered, washing clothing that has been offered to community members.

There's a lot of big data on this that really helps us to see that these organisations make a huge difference. This positivity and this willing to continue on a daily basis, making these efforts and making a difference to the life of people, it is really wonderful. And I actually would like to use this opportunity to extend my thank you to many of these organisations that really work so hard, to the many volunteers that try to make the lives of the many people that they're serving at least a little bit better to the degree that it is possible under those circumstances.

David Pembroke:

So Taylor, you clearly have had the same opportunity as Ingo to go through all of the data, go through all of the interviews that have taken place, to sit with that information, to reflect on the data. What did you take away from your analysis of the data?

Dr. Taylor Willmott:

Yeah, Ingo and I shared very similar findings. We obviously analysed separately, but we came to very similar conclusions. And I think to add to some of the themes that Ingo spoke about, I wanted to touch a little bit on almost the pride and a shared sense of we are all in this together and there's a sense of belonging among not only the leaders of these organisations but their employees and also the beneficiaries. We had interviewees talk about how they almost had formed part of their identity as being involved in these organisations and the causes that they were trying to address. So, for example, in the homeless space, some of the volunteers that work with their ... I guess on the front line on the coal face of these issues identify with the group that they volunteer with and to the regulars that come in are the beneficiaries of the services that they are offering to their local communities.

I think related to that was this idea of these organisations creating a shared space for people to come together and for that to be a foundation for sharing stories and lived experiences to build compassion that ultimately leads to the manifestation of collective engagement over a period of time. Some of the activities for creating that shared space was in a very physical sense of a meeting place, but a shared space can also be virtually and online as well. They were some of the key themes that I noticed when I was analysing the data as well, and I think a lot of synergy I think between the themes that Ingo and I both identified.

David Pembroke:

So listen, a question to both of you and Taylor to you first, clearly there's a role, and Ingo alluded to it earlier in terms of the work that he does with entrepreneurs, with business, and clearly government plays a role and certainly in the provision of service policy resources. But in terms of strengthening this sense of positivity, this sense of mission, this sense of purpose, did you take anything from the data that gave you some greater insights as to how communities around the world, because it's a common issue, all the common issues that are being dealt with, are there things that people can do going to that point around compassion that they may not be doing today that would lead to better results for people who are less fortunate?

Dr. Taylor Willmott:

Yeah, absolutely. I think there's a range of activities that leaders can engage with. I think in terms of creating compassionate communities, there's two sides. There's the bottom-up side to creating a compassionate community where it's really community members that are driving the collective and the change. Then the other side is the top-down model where policy changes in government or health systems are what spur the change and potentially what enable community members to feel empowered. Giving whether it's access to resources or providing structural legislative changes that allow that change to occur. In terms of specific activities, I think Ingo touched on a few of the ones that came through our interviews, but creating that shared safe space is first and foremost what's needed. Then from there, whether you're engaging in a co-design or a community consultation process, I think you know need to have the psychological safety there so that people do feel comfortable to share their own lived experience and how the social cause has touched themselves personally or touched people in their network.

And I'll share a quote that I highlighted from one of our participants about the importance of connecting as humans first in these activities. If you set up a co-design session, you can't just dive straight into how can we best help people that are suffering or in pain as a result of a particular complex problem or social issue? And this particular interviewee summed up the need to start with the fact that we are all humans and we all do have shared experiences. They shared it's the human relationship amongst the group at the table working together that matters first and foremost, but it's also the human relationship to whatever issue you are talking about or the social cause. The empathy and compassion to those who are on the receiving end of whatever the social cause is and the negative impact, the pain and suffering that surrounds that.

Then in terms of the collective processes, if we do want to achieve collective engagement but we're not in a relationship with each other first and building those connections, then you're going to find it very challenging to move from a group of individuals who are passionate about a cause to a group who is working in synergy together. Really compassion is the grease on the wheels for all other things. And that's the starting point.

David Pembroke:

Ingo, I'd put the same question to you that I just put to Taylor and your reflections on some of the intervention and change that can take place to strengthen this sense of compassion?

Ingo Karpen:

In addition to the examples that Taylor already has mentioned, I also would like to emphasise that we as individuals can do many things and can contribute in various ways through our own compassionate stance and our own compassionate behaviours on a daily basis. Now often people just think about things such as volunteering or donating, but there are even simpler things we can do on a daily basis. And it often starts actually with something like not blaming people for the situation that they're in, not judging people. Because often people find themselves in these very difficult or tricky situations through complex developments. Many of these people have been on difficult journeys. Often unfortunately, we as humans can fall into a tendency of making quick judgments or blaming people for where they are. On one hand, creating an awareness within oneself when this type of judgement or blaming might actually emerge and also maybe even help others understand when blaming our judgmental behaviour is being displayed.

So basically helping and creating awareness in the community for behaviours that are actually or make life more difficult for these people. At the same time, we're also more empowered nowadays when you think about, for example, social media, it is relatively straightforward and easy nowadays if we want to reach our direct networks and community members by leveraging our own social media in order to help create awareness for a specific cause that we want to support in the community. I think it's really important to highlight that trying to engage and support a specific cause doesn't just come down to volunteering or donating. It's actually as much as about it as creating awareness in the first place in the community by pointing out specific behaviours or situations and potentially even using your social media to have a voice and to leverage what you see to help others understand and recognise the experiences and situations that they find themselves in.

David Pembroke:

Do you have any tips as to how do you stop being judgmental or how do you get out of that mindset where you might observe somebody and think, "Well, their problem's their fault" or, "They must have done something?" Is there any insight there as to how you can be less blaming, less judgmental, and more compassionate?

Ingo Karpen:

I'm not an expert on this, but my own experience and listening to the stories of the people that we have spoken to, there's often a high degree of reflection. I think in order to basically not stop, but at least create an awareness for these somewhat automated processes that we have installed in ourselves that lead to quick judgments or quick blaming, to actually hold back for a second and reflect on and think, "Well, maybe this is more complex than what it seems to be."

Maybe these people are not in this situation because of alcohol or because they have got themselves into some form of addiction that could have been easily avoided in the first place, but maybe the circumstances have been extremely difficult and even I, or my friends, or whoever would find ourselves in the same situation if we had been on this very journey that is right in front of us. I think reflection is really important and acknowledging that to oneself too. And this, again, has also do a lot with the human ego and trying to put your own ego aside and actually putting other people, or giving other people this space that they deserve.

David Pembroke:

And Taylor, any tips from you having sort of read through the data? What sort of advice might you have for people?

Dr. Taylor Willmott:

I think it starts with empathy, and we kind of gave a definition for sympathy, empathy, and compassion in comparing the differences. But one of the commonly applied techniques in human-centred design is empathy building. And that requires stepping into the shoes of others. And in order to do that, yes, you can observe someone's circumstances and pain and make judgements or have unconscious bias about how they've ended up where they have, but it's that connection element that I think aids that process of building empathy for others. So, actually getting out in the community and talking to the people you're looking to serve. And we had a CEO who, he had his own lived experience of being homeless when he was younger and being in and out of the justice system, and he's now the CEO of an organisation that actively works to empower young people and to support them out of those circumstances.

And he said in his experience, it's very easily for him and the people that work with him to shift into that professional lens and be very solution focused and almost leave behind that human element even though he has his own lived experience. One of his practices is actually just getting out on the streets and having conversations with people and hearing their backstories about how they came to be where they are. And I think it's eye-opening for anyone that goes out with the intention of listening to people's stories and putting yourself into the shoes of those people.

And he said you forget that even for them to get out of bed meant that they had to roll over on the concrete, the cold concrete, wrap up their sleeping bag, find somewhere to brush their teeth. All those little things, might have been avoiding the police on the train because they couldn't afford the train ticket and not being able to have a shower for a few days and they may not have eaten, but then they've had to go through all of this that many of us wouldn't even fathom in order to show up for an appointment to receive help. Whether it's healthcare, mental health counselling support, or whether it's helping them put a job application together, whatever it might be.

So I think in order for us to really overcome almost that cognitive dissonance between not being able to relate to other people's experiences that we can clearly see has caused hurt and suffering, we need to be able to get out there and listen and talk to community and call it out in ourselves and others when we start to see others making assumptions within ourselves. But if you see other people judging the circumstance of others, I think it's up to us to stand up and call that out. And a lot of the leaders that we spoke to, I think are very adept in being able to navigate complex interpersonal relationships within organisations that are dealing with quite complex, highly emotive, and sensitive problems.

Ingo Karpen:

And if I may build on that, Taylor, that was really, really important. And I think you highlighted also something that I feel has to do with remaining curious. Often we might already have predefined ideas about why people find themselves in a specific situation. I think it's really important to remain open and actually start asking the questions, "Why? Why? Why? Why is this the case and what happened here and why did it happen?" Rather than entering this space with a fixed mindset and already a predefined understanding about why this situation is the way it is. Remaining curious, remaining open I think is another really important individual level element in this case, so that we can recognise the suffering of other people and remain open to that, why that is the case in the first place.

David Pembroke:

So just in conclusion and wrapping up today's conversation, clearly you have a lot of data to continue to work through, to continue to analyse, to continue to assess. Ingo, for you, where to from here, in terms of what you are going to be doing next in terms of the contribution that you're making to the Collective Engagement for Social Purpose project?

Ingo Karpen:

So on one hand we will continue analysing and coding the data, but I think it's really important to help the community understand the power of this phenomenon of collective engagement. Because for us it's really beautiful to see, the for the lack of a better word, social energy that is set free in the community when we see that actually our daily behaviours or our contributions to this social cause, the difference that that can make. I'm really keen on taking this work further in the sense that we want to help organisations and the community to understand how they can set free more of this social energy to make a difference in people's lives, how they can help people belong to certain communities, even if they're typically considered from our perspective, from our privileged perspective as being outsiders and help organisations to fight various stigmas that we might see in the community.

So hopefully with the next activities that are forthcoming, spreading the word about our findings, and thanks to you, David, and you making a difference in helping us communicating these findings, we want to create even more awareness for the importance of both compassion, and with that actually creating more social energy, freeing up social energy to further for people to contribute in the future.

David Pembroke:

And a final question to you, Taylor, is it possible that there may be a roadmap that can come out of this research that achieves exactly what Ingo is talking about there in terms of a pathway to be able to capture and release this social energy in order to achieve greater compassion, greater awareness, and a strengthening of the communities in which we all live?

Dr. Taylor Willmott:

Yeah, I think I'm very optimistic that we'll be able to get to a point of being able to share a framework or a roadmap, but I think the next stage will be more of a collaborative effort with leaders working in this space. Whether we go back to our interviewees now that we've started to unpack the key mechanisms and enabling conditions for collective engagement, to really pose a question to them, how best can we help you leverage compassion for collective engagement to help you achieve more impact in the work that you are doing? I do think it'll be situating our current findings within research guided practise to see how best that roadmap can be delivered to those who it'll benefit the most.

David Pembroke:

Well, listeners, stay tuned. There is more to come, there is more to come. We might have to go more than six parts, I think. There could be a little bit more. We might have to go to a maybe seven or eight part as we go through the next stages of the Collective Engagement for Social Purpose Research programme. A very big thanks to Dr. Taylor Willmott, and also to Professor Ingo Karpen. A big thanks to you both for joining us today on this episode, and we certainly look forward to further discussions in the future. Big thanks to both of you today.

Dr. Taylor Willmott:

Thanks, David.

Ingo Karpen:

Thank you, David.

David Pembroke:

And a big thanks to you, audience, for coming back once again, and again, if you are interested and if you didn't listen to me at the beginning of the programme and go back to listen to those earlier episodes, could I encourage you to do so? Because really, if this is an area of interest, the conversations that we have had over the last few months have been absolutely fascinating and really helping us to understand just exactly what are the insights that we're gathering in this fantastic research programme that is being conducted by both Dr. Taylor Willmott and also Professor Ingo Karpen and Professor Jodie Conduit as well at the University of Adelaide.

Please go back and listen to those and make sure you subscribe because next time we'll be back in your ears with more insights from this important research programme. But we are, on behalf of the team, very grateful for you listening to us today, and we will be back soon with the next episode of the Collective Engagement for Social Purpose Podcast. But for the moment, it's bye for now.

Outro:

You've been listening to the GovComms Podcast. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to rate and subscribe to stay up to date with our latest episodes.