

# **BROKEN HILL COMMUNITY ROUND TABLE**

**29<sup>th</sup> July 2000**

## **WORKSHOP PAPER**

# **Empowering Grass-Roots Groups to Strengthen Communities**

**John Murphy**

Mornington Peninsula Community Connections

## **INTRODUCTION**

This workshop will focus on presenting some ideas about building stronger communities through empowering community groups.

I will use the project with which I am involved, Mornington Peninsula Community Connections, as a case study to illustrate my points.

To begin, I would like to give you some background about Mornington Peninsula Community Connections, to explain the underlying principles, to share with you what the project does and why it does what it does.

Barrie Thomas, formerly co-owner of The Body Shop in Australia, and I established the project three years ago as an independent, non-profit, and free management advisory service for grass-roots community groups on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria. The Body Shop, through Barrie Thomas, funded Community Connections.

The Body Shop is an international company which sells mainly soaps and other body-care products. There are 85 retail outlets of The Body Shop throughout Australia and New Zealand. The Body Shop is well known for its interest in social issues, the rights of people and animals, and the environment.

The project is not funded through The Body Shop in Australia any more. It continues to be supported by Barrie Thomas who is now co-owner of The Body Shop in New Zealand. Barrie has established the Triple A Foundation in Australia to support the continued operations of Community Connections.

The project is located on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria, which commences approximately 40 kilometres south of Melbourne on the eastern side of Port Phillip Bay. Initially established as a 12-month pilot project, Community Connections has become an ongoing service.

Community Connections was established in recognition that many small community groups and services play a vital role in building the community's capacity for a more caring and a more effective society.

While many of these small, independent community groups are committed to and capable of supporting their communities, they are often restricted in their efforts because of limited access to financial, staffing and other resources. In recent times, all levels of government and the general community have significantly underestimated the important role grass-roots community groups play in the well being of communities.

Because funding for community services is often politically motivated, governments prefer to fund higher-profile community service organisations rather than small, relatively unknown groups. It is also more straightforward for governments to administer larger funding amounts to a smaller number of bigger organisations. Small community groups with limited resources cannot compete with better-resourced organisations for government and community funding.

### **Empowering Community Groups**

Community Connections provides assistance to small, low-income community agencies, neighborhood services and environmental groups in areas of planning, policy development, fundraising, service evaluation, public relations, organisational change, staff recruitment and training, research and social action.

Attempts are made to empower groups by assisting them to increase their influence as service providers or as community activists through helping them to develop further the knowledge and skills relevant to their work, and by improving their reputation and credibility as service providers.

Helping community groups to develop and maintain a good reputation is a major aspect of empowering them. Many community groups are 'quiet achievers' in their communities - doing good work, but doing it quietly. While this is commendable, because they are largely unknown outside of their own neighborhoods, more often than not these small community groups struggle to gain the resources they require to do their work. It is difficult for them to get community and government decision-makers to listen when they want to highlight the needs of their community or the needs of their group.

Community and government decision-makers are more prepared to take notice of community groups when the groups have a high public profile and credibility in the local community.

### **Background to the Project**

Community Connections arose from the involvement of Barrie Thomas and I with the services and activities of the Frankston Community Support and Information Centre.

The Centre is a small agency established 32 years ago by residents of the Frankston community with the support of the local council mainly to provide community information. It was one of Victoria's first Citizens' Advice Bureaus. Since 1968, the Centre has increased its range of services and activities. It is still operated by local residents, the majority of whom are community volunteers.

As one of the Centre's community volunteers, I was a member of the committee of management for six years, between 1990 and 1997, and was chairperson for five years. My volunteer work at the Centre was in planning and evaluating services, public relations, fundraising and research, supervising social work students on fieldwork placement, and supporting the manager.

As a resident of Frankston, Barrie Thomas had been a member of the Community Support and Information Centre's committee of management since 1995, and worked with me and other members of the committee on a number of community projects in Frankston.

Aware of the difficulties facing many smaller community agencies and neighborhood services, Barrie Thomas proposed that an experimental service be established to provide support to them on the Mornington Peninsula. The service would be based on the type of support provided by me to the Frankston Community Support and Information Centre.

### **The Important Role of Small Community Groups**

Based on our experience with the Centre and other community groups, it is clear that many people can and want to play an important role in the issues facing their communities. They can do this as individuals, or they can do it through community groups. Working through community groups can often be more effective because being part of a group legitimises the views and actions of community people; support can be provided to individuals by other members of the group; and a collective voice is often more effective than a single one.

Often it is the case that small community groups which are so closely connected to their community understand community issues and problems in ways that governments and people from outside the community never can. They are motivated by a passionate commitment to their community.

Professionals and the general community often see members of these groups who volunteer their time to the community as do-gooders or amateurs with limited abilities, but this is a very limited view because the findings of recent research strongly suggest otherwise.

### **Social Capital**

You have probably heard the term *social capital* in recent times. Social capital refers to a community's social assets, which is the extent and quality of people's involvement with others in their community through community and neighborhood groups.

When speaking about a community's financial capital, you are referring to the value of a community's financial assets such as property, buildings, equipment, money in the bank, investments, and so on.

When you refer to *social capital* you are referring to the value of a community's *people assets*.

We may not call it social capital, but we all know what social capital is. It is a new term for old beliefs about the good things in communities. For example, social capital is about community-minded people coming together regularly to either work for the community or to support one another. It is about people building productive and mutually rewarding relationships through their community groups. It is about people co-operating with one another. It is about people trusting one another. According to social capital theory, trust is an essential ingredient for people to work together effectively for their community. If people do not trust one another, they will not voluntarily work together.

Importantly, social capital is about developing community spirit.

Social capital has been described as *social glue* which holds communities together.

For social capital to grow, people need to be able to regularly interact with one another in community organisations, in situations where they can develop trusting relationships with each other, eg. working as volunteers, or being members of arts and crafts groups, playgroups, committees, service clubs, and so on.

Grass-roots community groups are where the process of building social capital starts in a community.

The following are some of the major community-building functions of grass roots community groups. They:

- demonstrate democratic processes through giving people from the community the opportunity to take an active role in local issues, events and activities.
- foster the development of a community's sense of social responsibility through increasing the awareness of members about social issues, and provide a medium through which their sense of social responsibility can be translated into action.
- contribute to the development of community spirit and social cohesion through bringing people together to pursue common goals and extending people's support networks and coping capacities

- make a contribution to the development of communities through mobilising local resources such as the knowledge, skills and commitment of community members
- contribute to the personal development of members through providing opportunities to broaden their views, enhance their knowledge, skills, confidence and self-esteem
- prepare people for entry or re-entry to the paid workforce
- provide opportunities to people to continue contributing to the community in an active, meaningful and personally satisfying way when they have retired from the paid workforce or are unable to undertake paid work.
- develop stronger, more capable and more caring citizens who in turn contribute to the development of stronger, more capable and more caring communities.

Community volunteers are interested, energetic and passionate people who care about their community and who are prepared to share freely their knowledge, experience, skills and their time to make their community a better place to live. Their involvement in the community is essential for community well being.

### **Project Activities**

Community Connections assists grass-roots agencies to commence activities and projects through initial consultation, the provision of information and advice, and ongoing consultation as required.

Although Community Connections supports a number of small community groups which provide welfare services, the project itself generally does not have a focus on addressing specific social problems through welfare services. Community Connections is more interested in supporting efforts to encourage people's involvement in local issues and events and to support the development of the small community groups which facilitate this.

The project does provide assistance to groups with the planning and evaluation of some welfare services, and my social work background in family and children's services has been useful in doing this type of work. But the focus of Community Connections is more about empowering

groups by helping them to develop the required knowledge and skills to plan and provide their services and activities competently themselves.

The project is also available to provide support to environmental groups, arts and cultural groups, playgroups, school groups, and sporting groups.

Some groups possess the necessary knowledge and skills already to undertake projects themselves, but lack the staffing resources to manage any but the most essential of agency activities. Other groups struggle in terms of knowledge and skills with the most basic of agency tasks. Community Connections aims to 'start where groups are at' in relation to only involving them in matters and issues for which they are ready.

Apart from the provision of occasional short-term support to groups experiencing crises, Community Connections normally does not engage short-term, quick-fix strategies to assist groups. Resources provided by or through Community Connections are used to enable groups to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills to benefit them over the longer term.

The project encourages and assists community agencies to pursue and maintain independence in decision-making with their management and service directions. Groups are encouraged and assisted to locate sources of financial resources which support their continued autonomy. This usually means avoiding sources of funding which normally have all kinds of 'strings' attached and which can be constraining to the functioning of grass-roots groups.

### **Bigger is Not Always Better**

Often it is the case that small community groups look toward bigger community organisations and welfare agencies as role models because it is the big agencies which are recognised and supported by governments and the community for their work. Consequently, often small community agencies think that getting bigger, substantially increasing their income, expanding their services, and employing more paid workers are the ways to proceed.

This is absolute economic rationalist thinking.

Increasing profits and continued growth might be the hallmarks of a successful business, but a successful, non-profit community group is one which continues to do what it does well. A prerequisite for success is not necessarily achieving more income and continual expansion. A small

community group does not have to be all things to all people. It does not have to respond to every new community need by developing new services or expanding existing ones.

A small community group can co-operate with other local groups to advocate for the development of new services in a community without feeling obliged to provide these new services itself.

Bigger is not necessarily better. Having more money does not necessarily make an organisation more effective, nor does having lots of services and staff. In fact, experience reveals that the reverse is more commonly the case. The inefficiency and impersonalness of many big bureaucracies is the best example.

While it is not my role to stand in the way of community agencies which aspire to become bigger or more businesslike, I will challenge them about this. I argue that there is a price to be paid for grass-roots community groups becoming bigger. More income usually means more complex and time-consuming funding accountability processes which reduce the amount of time available to manage and provide services and activities effectively; government funding bodies influencing, interfering and sometimes dictating agency directions can lead to a whole new agency philosophy, mission and consequent loss of identity; and volunteers can become subservient to paid professional workers which is disempowering for grass-roots community groups. Importantly, experience shows us that the bigger an organisation becomes the less personal it becomes. The personal touch has always been one of the main attributes of grass-roots community groups.

I will present an alternative model to groups, which is that small agencies are just as important as larger ones, and that small grass-roots community groups should not compare themselves with bigger organisations. They serve quite different functions in society.

I argue that sometimes it can be better to remain small and to strive to do what they do well which may not mean a substantial increase in funding. One of the main strengths of grass-roots community groups is that they can do so much with very little. Just like the little car that runs so economically on the 'smell of an oily rag', grass roots groups can run economically on limited financial resources. This is because they are supported by other resources that you cannot readily purchase or put a price on – commitment, knowledge, experience, skills and enthusiasm, all of which are volunteered by their members.

I need to emphasise that governments also utilise some of these arguments. However, almost without exception, whenever government representatives speak about small community groups being resourceful or needing to be more resourceful, it is about government trying to rationalise a reduction in funding or providing no funding at all. While grass-roots community groups are resourceful, there is a limit to the time and energy members have to pursue financial resources. Governments need to support the valuable work of small community groups, not with complimentary community cliches and noble rhetoric, but with financial and other resources.

### **Co-operative Approaches**

A major emphasis in Community Connections supporting small community groups is encouraging them to adopt co-operative approaches to achieve their goals rather than competitive ones. Groups are encouraged to collaborate on projects and activities, to share their knowledge, skills and where possible their financial resources on common activities.

Governments' promotion of vigorous competition among organisations for service tenders has led to tensions and divisions among competing organisations and has created an atmosphere of distrust in the community. A consequence has been a reduction in co-operation and collaboration between organisations.

### **Advocacy**

Community Connections encourages groups to use information gained through their services, activities and research to promote with governments and community organisations the needs and rights of disadvantaged members of the community.

An important objective of the project is to promote the important role of smaller grass-roots community groups with governments, businesses and communities. There is also a research component of the project which aims to support the other parts of the project, especially advocacy.

### **The Project's Potential to Support Other Communities**

An objective of the project is to establish whether a service of this type is beneficial to the Mornington Peninsula community and, if so, to consider

the potential for similar services to operate in other communities and funded by other sources.

Contrary to current competitive practice, which often entails withholding information from other community organisations in order to maintain a competitive edge, Community Connections believes in sharing information about what it does, what it knows and what it achieves with anyone who is interested. They can use the information in any way that they see fit, hopefully for the well being of their own communities.

### **Project Accountability and Independence**

Community Connections aims to be accountable to the community in which it operates. To achieve this, it needs to be independent from existing institutions such as government bureaucracies and from any other individual organisation.

When you work for an organisation, you are firstly accountable to the organisation and its needs. Those of you who may work for larger organisations can attest to this, as often it is the case that the needs of your organisation and the demands that it makes on you to meet organisational needs conflict with or take you away from your work in the community.

It is important for Community Connections to be free to criticise government and other institutions' policies and practices which disadvantage or discriminate against people or community groups.

Susan Kenny from Deakin University, who wrote *Developing Communities for the Future*, argues for the independence of community development workers, and expresses the view that bureaucrats are accountable to their bureaucracies through their managers rather than to the people they are working for and with. She continues that it is important for social movements to operate outside institutions and mainstream political processes and parties to allow radicalism and political freedom to be possible.

Just as the project advocates for grass-roots community groups to protect their independence, a priority for the project is to ensure that it does not simply become a servant of its funding source like many of the large non-government welfare organisations have become virtual servants of their government funding bodies.

Martin Stewart-Weeks from Albany Consulting in Sydney says that it is important for community organisations to retain their ability to disagree, to present alternative ideas, and sometimes to take politically radical action which originates from their own commitments and mission rather than those of government. The project subscribes strongly to this view.

Community Connections is subject to a level of accountability to Barrie Thomas as the main provider of project funding. While consultation about the directions and progress of the project occurs regularly between Barrie and I, it was agreed at the commencement of the project that Barrie would adopt a supportive rather than a directive role. This agreement has been maintained.

Although Barrie now lives in New Zealand I consult with him about various aspects of project operations two to three times a week via email, by telephone and we continue to meet regularly.

Although the project was established as an experiment based on the experience of Barrie and I at the Frankston Community Support and Information Centre, through consultation with community groups and research, the project is developing in an evolutionary way, with the future directions determined by community needs.

Again, this is more compatible with a community-development approach rather than a business-development approach. A business-development approach would be about having all kinds of pre-determined goals, objectives, and key performance indicators at the commencement of the project.

Community Connections, on the other hand, commenced with a raw concept. The seeds were sown with an aim to allow the project to grow organically. This meant not determining fully how the project was to work from the beginning, but to start slowly and to allow community needs and views to shape the future of the project.

The project was based on Barrie Thomas trusting me to do the right thing with his investment in the project, and me trusting him not to pull the rug out from under the project if it went well. There were no documented contracts between us and our arrangement was settled with a handshake.

## **Project Evaluation**

Given an aim is to assess the project's benefits to the community, evaluation is a critical component of the project.

Project monitoring is undertaken through regular consultations between Barrie Thomas and I, together with regular documented reports outlining the project's activities and issues. There is a local reference group which is consulted regularly, and this also forms part of the project's monitoring.

Community Connections was reviewed by Monash University in 1999 and the findings and recommendations of the review also contributed to the directions of the project.

## **Conclusion**

I have attempted to present some of the key aspects of empowering communities through supporting grass-roots community groups, and used some of the principles and activities of the project with which I am involved to illustrate my points.

If communities are to be truly empowered, governments and communities will need to acknowledge the important role that grass-roots community groups play in building and maintaining stronger communities.

Grass-roots community groups need to be supported rather than overlooked as has most commonly been the case in recent times. Supporting grass-roots community groups will encourage them to recognise their own strengths and the important role they play in society rather than have them adopt the view that they are inadequate as they are and, consequently, have to model themselves on bigger community organisations.