

A CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY

The Concept

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INTRODUCTION

Promoting active citizenship

The main purpose of a Centre for Community is to contribute to the achievement of a strong, vibrant and caring community through the promotion of *active citizenship*. A Centre for Community will promote ‘all things community’ and encourage people to take an active interest in their community - its history, its achievements, its celebrations, as well as the current issues and problems.

Active citizens essential for community well being

A Centre for Community is based on a belief that active citizenship is an essential part of a range of interdependent social, environmental and economic factors which have a bearing on overall community well being.

Passionate about their community

The Centre for Community concept is founded on a belief that often local people can understand community issues and problems as well as, and sometimes better than governments and others who live or are based elsewhere. They can be motivated by a passion for their community which is rarely equalled. The concept is also based on a belief that currently much community passion and talent lies dormant, especially among disadvantaged groups and communities.

Not utopian

A Centre for Community is not about pursuing the ideal community, whatever that might be, nor is it an attempt to get back to ‘the good old days’, whenever or whatever they were. A Centre for Community is firmly grounded in the present with a vision for the future.

Not a building

A Centre for Community is a movement or a process rather than a building (see p. 7).

Common sense and practical

Using common sense and practical approaches, it aims to identify the good things about community life and promote, celebrate and build upon them, as well as to encourage the community to be aware of and address the not-so-good things.

Not exploiting unpaid labour

Because an aim of a Centre for Community is to increase the interest and participation of local people in their community, inevitably this will lead to more volunteering. However, the purpose of a Centre for Community is not to recruit more unpaid staff for health, welfare and other services. A Centre will aim to support and protect community volunteers.

The concepts behind a Centre for Community are not new. Already there are many interested, enthusiastic and committed people and groups working towards the achievement of stronger communities. A Centre for Community will aim to be a specialised and sustained effort, and will highlight, complement, promote and support active citizenship.

WHAT IS A COMMUNITY?

Ife's (1997) view on defining 'community' underpins the approach to developing a Centre for Community as presented in this concept paper.

...community is essentially a subjective experience which defies objective definition. It is felt and experienced, rather than measured and defined. It is not particularly helpful to think of community as 'existing', or to 'operationalise' community in such a way that we can measure it. It is more appropriate to allow people to develop their own understanding of what community means to them, in their own context...

... community development is not about defining and establishing something called community, but rather an ongoing and complex process of dialogue, exchange, consciousness raising, education and action aimed at helping people concerned to determine and develop their own vision of community. This may be a very different version from that developed by another group...there is no single 'right' formula for what constitutes a community and no single 'right' way to develop it.

PURPOSE OF A CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY

A Centre for Community will aim to:

Stronger and more caring communities

- ❖ Contribute to the development of stronger, more capable and more caring citizens who in turn will contribute to the development of stronger, more capable and more caring communities.

Social and environmental responsibility

- ❖ Contribute to the growth of a community's sense of social and environmental responsibility by increasing community members' awareness of social and environmental issues.

Increasing social cohesion

- ❖ Contribute to the growth of community spirit and social cohesion through bringing people and groups together to pursue common goals.

ACTIVITIES OF A CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY

Flexibility

How an individual Centre for Community is structured and what it does depends on the needs of the community, the resources available and the preferences of the local people involved. A Centre for Community might operate most effectively as an independent body which maintains a promotion, co-ordination and resourcing role, collaborating with and supporting other groups with their community-strengthening activities.

The range of activities can include to:

Community spirit and mutual purpose

- ❖ Promote circumstances where people can associate to discuss and debate community issues, and develop a sense of community spirit and mutual purpose.
- ❖ Provide information about community services, activities and events to connect people to their community and its networks.

Encourage participation

- ❖ Promote participation within the community as essential to community well being.
- ❖ Facilitate, co-ordinate and support local events which promote community spirit and active citizenship.

Celebrate different cultures

- ❖ Acknowledge and celebrate the presence of diverse cultural groups in the community.
- ❖ Provide people interested in participating in their community with opportunities to identify community issues, projects and services which are compatible with their interests and capabilities.
- ❖ Provide people with opportunities through their community involvement to enhance their knowledge, skills and personal growth.

Education about active citizenship

- ❖ Work closely with local primary and secondary schools as well as tertiary institutions in education about active citizenship, and facilitate stronger links between schools and their communities.

Research

- ❖ Provide a research focus for community issues and support the efforts of universities and other institutions in their research on community themes.

Developing grass-roots groups

- ❖ Provide management advice and mentoring to grass-roots community groups with their development.
- ❖ Develop funding sources for grass-roots community groups which acknowledge their uniqueness, capabilities and autonomy.

Partnerships

- ❖ Promote the development of productive links and equal partnerships between community groups, business groups and government.
- ❖ Assist local groups to provide advice to all levels of government about community issues and needs.

Responsible economic growth

- ❖ Provide support to and work collaboratively with groups which are pursuing the community's economic well being in socially and environmentally responsible ways.
- ❖ Provide opportunities to learn about, connect with and celebrate the community's past through an exhibit and information on the community's history.

Highlighting community achievements

- ❖ Provide a showcase of community achievements to inspire, motivate and enthuse people about what can be achieved in their community.

WHY A CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY?

In recent times the effects of a wide range of social, environmental and economic changes have adversely affected communities. There are few signs that the 'tide is turning' for the better in these communities.

Breaking down of community

The strong promotion of individualistic and competitive philosophies by all levels of government and business has contributed to a breaking down of the 'sense of community' which traditionally has included co-operative, collaborative, trusting and caring relationships.

Declining active citizenship

Voluntarism is down in many areas of community activity. Many groups with older volunteers have expressed concern about the absence of the 'next generation' of volunteers for their groups.

While a variety of reasons is proposed for this situation, governments' failure in recent times to listen to or act upon community opinion has contributed to the disempowering of communities leading to increasingly passive responses from people to local issues. Also, growing numbers of financially disadvantaged people have become more inward looking as they have been forced to prioritise the meeting of their own basic survival needs. Other people are deterred from involvement in community problems because they feel overwhelmed by their complexity.

Regaining a sense of community

Various attempts are being made in Australia and elsewhere in the world to regain a stronger sense of community. The economy's current position as the most important framework through which to understand and plan for society is being challenged. The widely held belief that a prosperous economy will lead to the elimination of social and environmental problems is being disputed. There is little evidence that the economy's successes are being shared equally among communities.

Some of the community values which foster good neighborliness, caring for people beyond one's family and friends, civic mindedness, co-operation, collaboration and trust have gradually been eroded in many communities, and similarly it will be a gradual process to regain them.

Romantic notions of bygone times

In attempting to build a stronger sense of community, we should be wary of seeking inspiration from romantic notions about bygone times. Reminiscing about when things were better sometimes includes references to the attributes of smaller communities and rustic village life. We need to be mindful of the fact that these discrete village communities were mostly autocratically governed, patriarchal, intolerant of outsiders and punitive with those who breached inflexible community rules.

Strong community spirit

People in communities still come together in times of major crises such as bushfires, floods and droughts. During these times community spirit involving co-operation with and care for others is powerful. Reproducing a similar strong public spirit at other times to address ongoing issues and to build stronger and more caring communities is an aim of a Centre for Community.

MANAGEMENT OF A CENTRE

A Centre would be operated by the local community, with the style of management decided by the community.

Caretaking, not controlling

One option, suggested by a contributor to this paper*, is to consider the management of a Centre within the context of 'caretakers of the land' which is the traditional way indigenous people in Australia have taken care of their 'community'.

This approach would encompass the positive aspects of taking care of the environment and community without a concept of ownership that implies 'power and control' over things. The concept of 'caretakers' implies respect for the land and its people, participation in its well being, and responsibility for ensuring this. It would provide a basis that acknowledges Aboriginality, provide freshness to the concept of management and allow a sense of incorporation of the environment and its people. The concept implies that the environment and the community speak for themselves rather than funding bodies dictating directions.

* Peter Pa'apa'a is a social worker/community worker in the Maori and Pacific Islander community on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria.

FINANCING A CENTRE

No standard funding formula

It has become contemporary practice to speak about visions and costs 'in the same breath'. However, a Centre for Community is not typical of pre-planned programs with a funding formula already in place. Therefore, individual communities establishing a Centre for Community will need to determine the specifics about costs.

Custom designed

A Centre for Community is what a community wants it to be. It can be small scale or it can be more elaborate. It can start small and develop in stages or it can remain small. It can be an entirely new venture for a community or it can be an extension of an existing community group's activities.

All these things will have a bearing on funding.

Maintaining integrity

It is recommended that the common practice of re-shaping or compromising a project so that it meets eligibility criteria for existing government funding programs be avoided. A Centre for Community must have integrity for it to gain wide community support, be effective and sustainable.

At a time when many community groups have adopted 'rubbery' principles in order to pursue and receive funding from almost any source, subject to any conditions, and virtually by any means, it is recommended that a Centre for Community be high principled and discriminating with its fundraising.

Government funding not reliable

The community-building aims of a Centre for Community require a long-term undertaking and, therefore, Local, State and Federal Government funding programs may not be suitable or reliable given their preference for short-term financing, and the frequency with which governments and their program policies change.

The sustainability of a Centre for Community would be in doubt if it became dependent on large amounts of government funding. Also, past experience suggests that there is a direct relationship between the amount of government funding received and the amount of autonomy forfeited. A reduction in autonomy is likely to result in the loss of citizen participation and community influence over a Centre.

Community sources of support

It is recommended that as far as possible community sources of funding are obtained for a Centre for Community which may mean a smaller-scale beginning. Grass-roots community projects inevitably commence on a small scale, but by starting small and growing gradually in stages, the risks and pressures of growing too quickly are reduced and smaller structures are likely to be more sustainable.

Recommending community-based sources of funding over government sources does not exclude the possibility of receiving government funding. However, the issues relating to compromising the integrity of a Centre for Community and the possible risks which relate to project sustainability and management autonomy should be to the forefront of any consideration given to government funding.

Modest establishment funding from government would be preferred over larger amounts which could lead a Centre for Community to commence on a scale which could not be sustained, especially if it became dependent on government-funded staffing.

A CENTRE FOR COMMUNITY IS NOT A BUILDING

For some people the word 'centre' conjures up an image of a building – in this case a community centre. Most often a community centre is a building which accommodates community groups and out of which various services and activities are provided.

**It is a movement
or a process**

On the other hand, a Centre for Community is a community-building movement or a process (described by Jim Ife in his book **Community Development: Creating community alternatives – vision, analysis and practice**):

...of dialogue, exchange, consciousness raising, education and action aimed at helping people concerned to determine and develop their own vision of community.

A single building is not an essential component of a Centre for Community. Activities can be hosted by existing community groups from their own buildings; buildings can be borrowed or hired for events facilitated by a Centre for Community; it may have its own office or building or it can co-locate with another group or groups.

Given its emphasis on sustainability, the profile or image of a Centre for Community should not be overly identified with a particular location or building if they cannot be maintained on a long-term basis.

WHERE TO START

Don't rush

In recent times we have been disadvantaged by the 'time-is-money' approach to community planning, resulting in pressure to package things up quickly by impatient bureaucracies which for reasons of economic efficiency need answers promptly to the who, what, why, when, where, how and how much questions. Not nearly enough time has been allocated

to discussion or evaluation of the strengths, limitations and overall potential of concepts. Bureaucratic practice has been to translate raw ideas into programs in the shortest possible time.

As a consequence, many of our community programs have been poorly thought through at the planning stage, inadequate or sometimes no consultation has occurred with communities, and programs have commonly been inflexible, ineffective, temporary, sometimes a nuisance, and occasionally damaging to communities.

Begin local discussion

The first stage of a Centre for Community is for local people to speak about it. How this occurs is up to the participants or those introducing the concept to the community. The temptation to convert the concept into a project before wide community opinion has been obtained should be resisted.

Obtaining broad community input may be difficult, especially when communities are accustomed to being told what is going to happen rather than being asked what should happen, but this does not excuse organisers from making strong attempts to gain community opinion and involvement in the planning of a Centre for Community.

Bureaucrats facilitating, not leading

Just as governments come and go which results in a lack of continuity in support for community programs, career bureaucrats and other professionals also come and go. As a rule, bureaucrats, other professionals, or 12-month project workers should not assume leadership roles for the development of a Centre for Community. When they leave their current jobs for better ones, or when their contracts expire, they will take a significant proportion of their knowledge, skills and networks with them. An exception may be a worker who lives and works in a community and who has made a continuing commitment to the development of a Centre for Community. Generally, however, a facilitative and educative role in the development of a Centre for Community may be more appropriate for these workers.

A collective leadership approach might be a useful way for local people to commence deliberations about a Centre for Community.

An inclusive approach

A Centre for Community should not be over-represented by any one or small number of groups from the community. Community building requires the involvement of a wide range of interest groups. This does mean that the initial impetus for a Centre for Community should not originate from a small, non-representative group, but early attempts should be made by the initiators to gain wider involvement.

ENTREPRENEURISM

Beware of the entrepreneurs

As the concept is being discussed more widely in the community, it is becoming clear that some groups are keen to pursue involvement as a means to advance the interests of their own particular group. There is a perception that involvement with a Centre for Community is a medium through which groups can obtain more funding and add another 'string to their bow' – diversification of programs and funding sources being a good strategy for groups with expansionist visions or just keen to survive.

This type of entrepreneurship might be considered good practice within an economic rationalist framework, but it is contrary to the philosophy and aims of a Centre for Community, and in the short term such groups are unlikely to have much to contribute to the development of the concept.

'HIJACKING' OF THE CONCEPT

Beware of the hijackers

In its present form, the concept involves the Centre for Community being a local initiative, to be 'owned' by the community and managed democratically by local people.

If the concept captures the imagination of a community and progresses to a developmental stage, at some point an individual, group or organisation may want to exploit it to achieve political or career aspirations.

Some people operate within very competitive work settings, eg. government and business, where success most often is achieved through well-refined skills in entrepreneurship and opportunism. This sometimes involves possessing flexible principles and adaptable ethical standards; an ability to exploit the available resources to suit their own ends; making good choices of influential people, high-profile projects and powerful organisations with which to associate; and proficiency in self-promotion.

The knowledge, skills, support and possibly the approval of some of these people may be needed to pursue the development of a Centre for Community. However, caution should be taken with potential 'hijackers'. Most likely they would want to change some of the core elements of the concept to suit their own ends. Of concern would be changes which undermine the influence and involvement of community members.

ALTERNATIVE WAYS OF DOING THINGS

The following quotation from Jim Ife's book **Community Development: Creating community alternatives – vision, analysis and practice** (1997) is an apt conclusion to this paper:

Despite the formidable achievements of modern, Western, industrialised society, it has become clear that the current social, economic and political order has been unable to meet two of the most basic pre-requisites for human civilisation – the need for people to be able to live in harmony with their environment, and the need for them to be able to live in harmony with each other. If these two needs cannot be met, in the long term the achievements and benefits of modern society will be transitory.

The inability of the dominant order to meet these needs can be seen in the crises currently facing not only Western industrialised societies, but all societies. The world is characterised by increasing instability – whether ecological, economic, political, social or cultural – and existing institutions seem only able to provide solutions which in the long term, and even in the short term, make things worse.

In this context, the need for alternative ways of doing things becomes critical.