



# Empowering Communities! Who Are We Kidding?

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***‘Don’t talk to me about empowerment. They don’t care about us. They used us for three years, squeezing every bit of publicity out of us that they could and then dropped us like a hot potato when the funding ran out.***

***I’ve lived in this neighbourhood for 30 years and this was about the seventh government-funded project that they’ve set up here in that time. Governments come and go and workers come and go. They’re always full of promises, but we’re still here at the end of it all no better off.***

*Jean, 63, long-term resident of a disadvantaged community speaking about a recently ended three-year government-funded community strengthening project.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper is a critical commentary. It emphasises a number of fundamental flaws with current attempts at empowering communities through Federal and State Government-funded programs.

The views presented are those of community workers John Murphy and Joe Cauchi. John Murphy is funded by a private foundation to support the development of grass-roots community groups in Frankston and on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria. Joe Cauchi is a senior manager in local government whose range of responsibilities includes strategic planning for and direct involvement in community strengthening activities within the Mornington Peninsula Shire.

With its emphasis on working together to build and strengthen communities through the empowerment of local people, current community-building programs sound appealing. Based on some of our recent personal experiences, however, we believe that much intervention aimed at helping communities actually damages them.

We do not claim that government-funded empowerment strategies have no benefits at all for communities. We do argue, however, that often the benefits received are incidental and accidental rather than resulting from well-thought-through ideas, well-planned and well-resourced projects, and a long and continuous commitment by funding bodies to particular communities and individual projects.

Empowering communities is a complex process and inevitably mistakes are made. However, government funding bodies and the organisations that they fund would have us believe that their projects are mistake free. Project reports and other documents that are analytical, critical and transparent about the process and outcomes of empowering communities are lacking. On the other hand, material containing public relations spin boasting about how successful community policies and programs have been or will be are in abundance. A commitment to the process of learning from mistakes does not appear to be apparent in the documentation that we have read.

In the paper we maintain that the origin of many of the problems with government-funded attempts to empower communities is politics, that is the desperate need of governments to be seen by the electorate to be addressing community problems. In our experience, the politics underpinning empowerment dominates the process and renders it largely impotent as a long-term community problem-solving approach. Although, as we will argue, none of the key stakeholders ever concedes this openly, except for maybe the ordinary community folk involved with projects. They have a propensity for enduring honesty at a time when the difference between success and failure with government-funded community projects has become blurred.

We are not experts in the area of community building or empowerment of communities, although hopefully 50 years of accumulated knowledge and direct experience between us in community work provides some credibility to our commentary. We make no apology for the fact that our paper's analysis is based on our personal observations, experience and understanding of the issues. In the absence of credible other information on the topic in Australia, there is little else on which we can base our views. Neither do we plead enduring innocence regarding the criticisms that we have levelled at others in this paper. Our attempt via this paper to be part of the solution has originated from our roles in being part of the problem.

While our opinions have originated mainly from our experiences, we have been influenced variously by some of the writers and commentators who have something to say about community and empowerment, most notably Jim Ife, Noel Pearson, Pat Dodson, Susan Kenny, Barry Jones, Robert Putnam, Eva Cox, Anthony Giddens, Robert Theobald, Don Edgar, Paul Brickell, Mike Geddes, Saul Alinsky, Thomas Moore and others.

In the paper we refer to *ordinary community members*. It is not our intention to imply that either communities or their members are ordinary in the sense of being banal or uninteresting. Rather, it is simply an expression to differentiate between employed professional workers who are involved with community projects and the community folk (who also, by the way, often are professionally qualified) who volunteer for projects. In our view, community volunteers are the lifeblood of communities and far from ordinary.

## **WHAT IS EMPOWERMENT?**

While much contemporary community-building practice is based on an empowerment model, in our view, many of the problems with empowerment are based on a lack of understanding of what it is and especially how to achieve it. There are many definitions of and much interest in the topic of empowerment. A Google search, for example, reveals millions of entries.

Put simply, in the context of community building, empowerment means helping people, individually or collectively, to gain control or greater control over their lives. It means providing them, often because they are disadvantaged in some way, with opportunities and resources to develop knowledge, skills and motivation to pursue positive change to their personal circumstances and/or to their communities. Also, being empowered can contribute to people's physical, psychological and economic well being. There are many different ways to achieve empowerment depending on

the particular situation and whether the focus is on the individual, the group or the community.

The fundamental principles underpinning the empowerment of communities are self-determination and self-reliance, that is communities need to be assisted to develop the ability and obtain the resources to manage their own affairs, which in particular involves formulating their own directions and solutions to local problems. This involves having control of or a major influence over the processes involved.

Rarely is it clear, however, what is meant by the term 'empowerment'. The term is used so frequently without definition or with such widely varying definitions by government funding bodies, funded organisations and community workers that at best it is confusing and at worst it has little meaning.

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### *How much power do governments want communities to have?*

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For example, it is not clear how much power governments want communities to have through the process of empowerment. Does empowering communities mean giving them a major role in decision making or simply an opportunity for a limited role? If it is the latter, how much of a role and for what kind of decisions? Who decides this? If local people are included in some decision making but excluded from other decision making, are they truly empowered? Is power which is given to a community by governments through an artificial or engineered process, such as a community-building program, and dependent on a large but finite injection of money, stronger and more resilient than the power which is gained by a community over time through the fostering of its own ideas, resources and enthusiasm (and supported by governments)?

Can a community be truly empowered if a proportion of its population remains disempowered because of poverty and other disadvantage? Is addressing the causes of people's disadvantage, which is about the way society makes opportunities and benefits relating to education, housing, health, employment, adequate income, etc. available or inaccessible to certain people, an inseparable aspect of empowering a community? Are attempts to lift community spirit by providing temporarily the resources to hold lots of enjoyable community events or beautifying the facade of a community physically only short-term distractions for disadvantaged people because the underlying causes of their disadvantage remain unaddressed?

Is empowerment a genuine opportunity for community members or just a token one designed to create an impression of democracy? Do the local governance structures of community-building projects stand up to scrutiny in relation to the numbers of ordinary community members involved compared to the numbers of professional workers? Even if numbers are equal, which group is likely to have the most influence over project decision making – the articulate, confident, assertive and well-educated professionals or the less-educated members of the community whose self esteem and confidence have been eroded through years of deprivation?

With short-term community-building projects, can funded organisations wait for local participants to be brought up to speed so that pressing funding application deadlines can be met, goals and objectives achieved on time, project management problems solved and accountability commitments to funding bodies fulfilled in the agreed timelines? Is it simply easier for anxious and impatient professional workers and funded organisations to maintain firm control over projects but create an illusion that projects are partnerships where local community members have a major say?

Can well-intentioned government workers closest to the community and who are aware of the problems associated with government-funded empowerment strategies claim with any credibility that they are powerless because their good intentions become subservient to the political aspirations of senior bureaucrats and politicians? If concerned government workers do not try to be an integral part of the solution, are they simply part of perpetuating the problem?

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***Is empowerment just an illusion created by governments?***

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Is empowerment just a contemporary buzz word used by governments to dress up old policies and programs whose effectiveness has been questionable? Do applicants for funding really believe in the concept of empowerment or are they just playing the traditional game of couching the language of their funding applications in the high-principled rhetoric and public relations spin of the funding body? Is empowerment simply the means for governments to promote their good intentions to the electorate, and for funded organisations the means for generating income and public relations?

There is a long list of similar questions highlighting the problems with the theory and process of empowering communities. It would seem to us that the reason there are few attempts either to ask or answer these kinds of difficult questions publicly is because the answers are already known to governments and funded groups. The only people not aware of what empowerment is really about are the ordinary community members who have been hoodwinked into believing that efforts to empower them are well thought through and will be successful.

## **IMPOSING EMPOWERMENT**

While it is essential that the process of empowering communities involves local people in decision making, contemporary practice imposes almost every aspect of it on communities. For example, the current crop of community-building strategies which aims to empower communities occurs within a strong framework of government priorities, government policies and government programs which are *imposed on* communities rather than have originated from them. Even when local involvement is encouraged, there is a strong element of central control through funding application and accountability processes.

Most often with little reference to communities beforehand, governments have decided that an empowerment model, most aspects of which seem to have been copied from the United States or the United Kingdom, contain the best strategies to strengthen communities and address their problems. Governments have chosen the

key principles, the underpinning theories, the various models (eg. community capacity building, neighborhood renewal, community regeneration, etc.), the funding eligibility criteria and application processes. Governments select the communities where its programs will be installed and the organisations which will carry them out. It decides when they will start and when they will finish. Clearly empowerment is something that is *done to* rather than something that communities *do for* themselves.

It is true that community projects focussing on empowerment may need to be ‘kick started’ in some communities, especially disadvantaged ones where low confidence and self esteem among members is accompanied by a lack of knowledge about community-building processes. Some groundwork undertaken beforehand by those possessing the essential knowledge and expertise can be helpful. The main problems that we have observed with this, however, is that many community projects are conceived by funded organisations well before ordinary community members have become substantially involved. For example, many projects are planned at the funding application stage and key project components such as the mission, goals, objectives, staffing model and the budget have been established without community input of any consequence. Even when ordinary community members are consulted beforehand by the applicant for funding, most commonly the process is confined to just one or two brief meetings which invariably are convened and dominated by professional workers. In most instances, this is insufficient time and an inadequate process for ordinary community members to develop a good understanding of the proposed project. More often than not, it is an inadequate process as well for the professional workers involved.

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***Funded organisations plan community-building projects before the involvement of community members.***

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If increased consultation with and support from community members does happen, most often it is *after* an organisation has received notification that its application for funding has been successful. In these circumstances, ordinary community members may have some input on the project’s proposed activities, but usually it will be limited because the major decisions have been made already.

Mostly, however, governments and funded organisations adopt a ‘we-know-what’s-best’ approach and simply install pre-planned programs in communities with an expectation that the locals will co-operate. While projects are presented publicly as partnerships with the community, in reality it is usually the funded agency and the government funding body which are the major or controlling partners.

## **EMPOWERMENT IS WHIMSICAL**

Further compounding the difficulties with empowerment is the common belief that communities which have been disempowered previously can be re-empowered later. This approach presupposes a high level of resilience in communities which is often not the case. Communities, for example, which have experienced negative social and economic change can become increasingly vulnerable, discouraged, depressed and pessimistic about the possibility of their situation improving. In these circumstances,

new government short-term community-building projects which promise to solve their problems are unlikely to be greeted enthusiastically.

Exacerbating this situation is that communities affected by long-term disadvantage have had to endure generations of government-funded, short-term experimental projects designed by ‘experts’ from outside, which have been full of promises but ultimately have not lived up to expectations. In these communities disillusionment with and cynicism about new solutions are common.

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***Some disadvantaged communities have had to endure generations of short-term experimental projects which have failed to live up to expectations.***

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Whatever empowerment means, history indicates that attempts to achieve it are inconsistent and often the effects are temporary, despite all the talk about sustainable community building. A change in government, for example, usually results in a shift in belief about the nature and extent of the role of communities in decision-making. Communities, therefore, can be empowered or disempowered based on different governments’ whims and fancies.

## **HONEST REPORTING: AN OXYMORON**

The intention of project reporting and evaluation of community-building projects is to inform stakeholders about whether the project has progressed as planned and its goals have been achieved. Stakeholders are those who have a direct involvement with or investment in the project. They include voters, ratepayers, volunteers, employed workers, funding bodies, funded organisations, other community organisations, education and training institutions.

Project reporting and project evaluation, however, are political processes. Funding bodies and politicians use them in an attempt to convince the electorate that they are addressing community issues and problems successfully. Funded groups use them for public relations and fundraising, that is to enhance their organisation’s reputation, to consolidate their existing funding, to lay a foundation for obtaining funding in the future, to change a project or end it, and so on.

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***Exaggerating project successes and concealing problems casts aspersions on all claims of achievement.***

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It is important for governments and the community to know what works and what does not work when planning projects and one of the best ways to establish what works, in theory at least, is to seek out and consult with projects of a similar nature or to gather information about previous projects. Nowadays, however, it is so easy to get away with exaggerating project successes and downplaying or concealing problems through false reporting that it casts aspersions on all claims of achievement

with community projects. It is impossible without scrutinising community projects personally or having access to inside information to ascertain whether they have really worked or not.

The practice of funded groups to publicly showcase achievements and conceal their failures or difficulties, at least their major ones, is part of a culture of not sharing mistakes and is unofficially condoned by government funding bodies. They benefit politically from the promotion of successful projects and gain little from the exposure of not-so-successful ones. While some government funding bodies maintain that they like to know about the problems faced by projects, most funded groups are not convinced that being truthful about their problems will win them any favours with funders, especially if problems have been serious, unresolvable and have the potential to embarrass funding bodies publicly.

A good example of the practice of highlighting successes and concealing difficulties can be found in government-produced documents describing their community-building programs. According to these positively-worded documents, every project has been successful or is well on its way to becoming successful. Additionally, projects never experience serious problems or failures – at least not serious enough to rate a mention. Further, when government workers speak publicly about their department’s community policies and programs they spend 99 per cent of the time describing the noble goals and positive outcomes and pay only lip service to the problems experienced, which usually they refer to vaguely as ‘challenges’.

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***Funded organisations write what their funding bodies want to hear.***

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For funded groups, a successful project means an enhanced reputation and continued government funding, if not for their current project, then for the next one. For consultants engaged to evaluate community projects, it means increasing the prospects of receiving further contracts through developing a reputation as someone who can be trusted not to ‘rock the boat’. Usually they produce diplomatically written and bland reports designed to please everyone. Neither of these stakeholders gains from disclosing publicly the problems faced by the community projects with which they are involved.

It is not helpful for those of us who work in the field to be deprived of accurate information about the true outcomes of attempts to empower and strengthen communities. How will those of us who are directly involved in community building, especially those new to the field, ever know what works and what does not work if the only information accessible to us about projects is full of public relations hype? Importantly, how will the next generation of community workers, agency managers, government workers and politicians be able to plan effectively and assess the worth of particular community-building strategies if the only historical literature to which they are exposed contains spin which indicates that everything tried has worked?

We and the communities in which we work are done a significant disservice when we are misled by spurious claims that all attempts to strengthen and empower communities have been successful. It does little for our confidence and self esteem to discover the truth the hard way, through making otherwise avoidable mistakes with our community projects and being confronted unexpectedly by serious problems

about which we could have been forewarned. Learning through serious mistakes in our community work is not the best way when they can have such a negative impact on the communities in which we work, most of which are already disadvantaged.

## **HONEST REPORTING: AN INTERNATIONAL OXYMORON**

Many of the current community-building programs which governments install in communities have been imported from overseas, community capacity building and neighbourhood renewal among them. Invariably, our government policy makers get their information about these overseas community-building programs from reports and evaluations sponsored by overseas government funding bodies as well as from consultations with the funded organisations which have operated them.

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*Australia does not have a monopoly on fudging the truth about community-building.*

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Australia, however, does not have a monopoly on dishonest reporting about community-building projects. Overseas governments and funded organisations are likely to exaggerate successes and downplay their failures as well. This casts aspersions on the evidence which our governments use to assess the viability of overseas programs to operate effectively here.

A search of the overseas literature will reveal strong criticisms of community capacity building and neighbourhood renewal programs, some of them dating back to well before our governments started to import them, but it seems that Australian governments and funded bodies either are not cognisant of the criticisms, or are but ignore them. Two critical papers by UK authors worth reading are:

Mike Geddes' *Evaluating English Experiences of Governments and Communities in Partnership: The Empire Strikes Back*

<http://www.public-policy.unimelb.edu.au/conference06/presentations.html>

Paul Brickell's *People Before Structures*

<http://www.demos.co.uk/publications/peoplestructures>

## **IMPORTING 'LOCAL' SOLUTIONS**

It is important that a community-building project be tailored to suit the particular community in which it is to operate. No two communities are exactly the same. They differ in their social, economic and environmental characteristics, relationships with other communities and the different levels of government, the community's issues and problems – their history, the causes and the outcomes of previous attempts to address them, the morale of the community, the local politics, the formal and informal protocols for decision making, the various personalities, their individual agendas, personal influence, and so on.

However, despite the community-building catchcry, 'local solutions to local problems', governments in Australia have a long tradition of importing solutions for local problems from overseas.

One of the main assumptions underpinning imported community-building strategies is that they are universally suitable and better than 'home-grown' varieties. Neither is always the case because community programs designed overseas are tailored for unique social, economic and environmental circumstances. It is not uncommon for overseas consultants to be brought to Australia to train communities in how to operate imported programs. While this may be helpful to some degree, it does not take into account the wide cultural and community differences and how these might impact on the expected project outcomes. In most instances, overseas consultants brought here to teach us can only provide lip service to these differences because of their lack of local knowledge.

This does not mean that we cannot learn and benefit from imported programs, including adapting them to suit local conditions. However, overseas community programs are not always readymade solutions to our community problems. While in many instances community building from country to country may share similar principles, local differences require individual strategies to be interpreted and applied quite differently. In our experience, there seems to be an assumption by funding bodies and funded organisations that this will occur simply through osmosis.

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***It is easier to copy overseas models than develop our own.***

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Accessible information about local and successful community-building efforts is lacking. There are stories from almost every town in Australia about the collective efforts of townspeople to address local problems and make their communities stronger, but little efforts are made by governments to document their achievements (and failures) and the reasons for them. It seems that it is much more convenient for our governments simply to copy English and American community-building models rather than develop local models based on local experiences.

## **LONG-TERM COMMITMENT**

Almost always government solutions overlook the fact that to build strong communities and to address major problems, sustained efforts over many years are required. In recent times, however, 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 and electoral expediency, 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 and strategies. Bureaucratic practice has been to demand that raw ideas be translated into programs in the shortest possible time and outcomes required long before they can realistically be achieved. Importantly, hardly ever is enough time given to consulting community members before organisations apply for project funding.

Because the primary motivation of governments with their community-building programs is to be seen by the electorate to be addressing community problems successfully, short-term projects work best for them. This is because generally government-funded projects gain most publicity during their early stages, that is through the initial media fanfare accompanying the official announcement that funding is being provided and the subsequent launch of the project.

Governments maximise the publicity they can gain from new projects. Funding agreements stipulate all kinds of requirements about funded groups taking every opportunity to publicly acknowledge government support. This includes ensuring the acknowledgement of government support in all media coverage of the project.

We have included a few examples below from the two-page 'Promotional Guidelines Schedule' of the Victorian Government's Community Support Grant:

*Before the grant is released, the recipient is required to supply the Community Support Fund with details of the means which will be used to acknowledge the support of the Victorian Government through the provision of a Victorian Community Support Grant from the Community Support Fund.*

*VCSG funding is to be acknowledged verbally in speeches and oral presentations related to the funded project. In addition, written acknowledgement of the funding is to be included in press releases and on documents, publications, brochures websites and the like. The Government, through an appropriate Minister, should also be given the opportunity to contribute to a sponsor's message for any relevant publication such as programs or catalogues.*


*In addition to written acknowledgement, the official Government logo (as shown below) must be included on all promotional materials such as press releases, signage, websites, brochures, fliers, posters, invitations, programs and catalogues.*



The following are two examples of State Government-produced promotional signage:



**State Government of Victoria**

Supported by the Victorian Government  The Place To Be

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# Supporting Communities






**Safety Beach Community Centre.**

The redevelopment of the former Safety Beach Sailing Club will include improved facilities for the Safety Beach Sailing Club and provision for the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Inc. Safety Beach, as a co-tenant. The new building will also include multi purpose space for various community activities.

The project is jointly funded by Council; Victorian Government through the Community Support Fund; and Marina Cove Pty Ltd.

Financial contributions are also acknowledged from Hillview Quarries Pty Ltd; Safety Beach Sailing Club; and the Australian Volunteer Coast Guard Inc. Safety Beach.

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Contract Price	\$1,243,006.80	    
Client	Mornington Peninsula Shire Council	
Project Manager	McGinley and Partners Pty Ltd. Tel. 9899 9870	
Architect	Forgan Smith Architects (Qld.) Pty. Ltd.	
Builder	DURA (Australia) Constructions Pty. Ltd. (Mr John Grubb, Tel. 0412 875 681	

The Federal Government promotes its support of communities as well:

 Australian Government  
Department of Family and Community Services

We are a  
**Can Do Community**

An Australian Government Initiative  
Telephone 1300 653 227 www.facs.gov.au/cando

State Winner 2003



Recipients of government funding are required also to report on how they have publicised the source of their funding. The Victorian Government's Community Support Fund progress report template is a good example. The first question is not about how the project has progressed to date or if there have been any issues or problems. Rather, funding recipients are required to indicate how they have publicised the Community Support Fund. While it is reasonable for government support to be acknowledged publicly, in this instance the government makes no attempt to disguise the fact that its first interest is achieving publicity outcomes.

Opportunities, however, for ongoing publicity from community projects are limited. Once a project's honeymoon phase has ended, those involved locally become preoccupied with pursuing important but nevertheless more lacklustre day-to-day activities publicity wise, which result in fewer good publicity opportunities for governments. Effective publicity campaigning has to be ongoing, so it is in governments' interests, therefore, to create further opportunities for publicity by continually introducing new projects. Mostly this has to be achieved with the same pool of money rather than from additional funds, so short-term community projects work best in this regard. When one project ends, money is freed up to start another project somewhere else.

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***Short-term projects only dabble in community building.***

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Although short-term projects might provide the best publicity for governments, 12-month projects or one-off grants supporting projects for only a couple of years do little more than dabble in community building unless they are a forerunner to more sustainable approaches. Also, a long-term commitment does not mean installing one different short-term program after another in a disadvantaged community. While this is common practice, it is a stop-and-start approach which can be destabilising for communities. Finishing one project and starting a new one involves a loss of continuity and momentum, including a loss of committed project volunteers, employed workers, their knowledge, skills and networks.

Governments and the organisations that they fund are notorious for developing new community-building initiatives instead of building on the knowledge, experience and skills of existing projects and organisations. Government policies which stipulate one-off grants for individual projects make it difficult if not impossible for existing projects, despite how successful they have been, to obtain a second round of funding for their current directions from the same government source as the first grant.

While some contemporary approaches to empowering communities do involve a longer-term commitment of resources by governments, unless the other issues raised in this paper are addressed, longer-term programs simply extend the exposure of communities to the risks of damage being done to them and the benefits to the community are unlikely to be sustainable.

As indicated earlier, major overhauls of community policies and programs every time there is a change in government are not an effective way to empower communities or address their problems. The refusal of governments to adopt widespread bipartisan approaches to community building to ensure the continuance of effective policies and strategies beyond any one government's term of office is a major deficiency.

## LIMITED KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Effective community building is a complex pursuit. It requires a good understanding of the theory of community building accompanied by a sound knowledge of the particular community to which the theory is to be applied. The unique combination of these factors will always have a bearing on the nature, the process and the outcomes of local community-building. None of them should be excluded from the community-building equation because only through possessing a good understanding of the complex interrelationship between them can a community-building project reach its full potential. With government-funded community-building projects, achieving ambitious outcomes in unrealistically short periods of time is difficult when core knowledge and practical experience are lacking at the start.

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*Knowledge and skills in community-building are lacking.*

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Few attempts appear to be made to assist funded groups to achieve their projects' goals either by providing or facilitating basic training in community-building theory and practice, project planning and evaluation, financial management, public relations, fundraising, networking, forming partnerships, teamwork, managing meetings, conflict resolution, advocacy, and so on.

A fundamental aim of empowerment through community projects is substantial involvement and control by ordinary community people. One of the results, however, of having community members lacking in the necessary knowledge and skills to make projects work, especially within tight timelines, is that professional workers supporting projects and funded organisations overseeing them maintain greater involvement with and tighter control over them than ideally they should. This is not empowering for the ordinary community members involved with the projects.

Limitations in the knowledge and skills of professional community workers are covered on page 16.

## EXCLUSION OF GRASS-ROOTS GROUPS

The importance of local people being involved in attempts to build and strengthen communities is emphasised strongly in the literature that we have read and is reflected clearly in government community-building policy. Most of the writers and commentators named in the introduction to this paper have highlighted strongly the importance of the knowledge, wisdom, passion and skills of ordinary community members being recognised, fostered and placed at the foundation of efforts to develop stronger communities. Often, however, government support for community-building projects is not accessible to many grass-roots community groups. Small community groups (especially the smallest ones) do not receive information about the available opportunities for government support because they are not on mainstream mailing lists nor do they network widely with mainstream groups and government.

Rarely, for example, would members of small grass-roots community groups have the same degree of access to senior bureaucrats from State and Federal Government funding bodies as do the heads of bigger community organisations, such as Local Government. Opportunities to put their case, often semi-informally, before or after a funding application has been submitted can be an invaluable way for senior workers from bigger community organisations to bolster their chances of securing funds for their projects. At this level special deals can be negotiated and occasionally grants allocated from discretionary funds. Invariably, members of grass-roots groups are confined to the more formal processes of contact with funding bodies, most often with departmental liaison officers who can be supportive and make recommendations, but with much less influence than their senior counterparts.

Even when small groups are informed about the opportunities for government support, often funding application processes impede rather than assist their efforts. Application processes show little understanding or appreciation of the grass-roots sector, and are geared more towards bigger, better-resourced and more informed groups. For example, because they are not familiar with the concepts and contemporary language of community building it is difficult for smaller groups to address funding criteria adequately. Also, application forms containing ambiguous and repetitive questions are confusing and daunting to small groups uninitiated in the process of applying for government funds.

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***A serious problem with community building is the language.***

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In our experience, a serious problem with community building is the language used to describe it in government documentation and by government workers and professional community workers speaking about it. While government workers and professional community workers are familiar with the language from governments' new community policies, usually ordinary community members are not. The use of language, therefore, which is outside the experience and reality of most grass-roots groups and individuals provides yet again another serious barrier to their inclusion. In our experience, rarely are most government and professional workers mindful of or considerate enough to de-jargonise their language when speaking to ordinary community members.

Another contributor to the exclusion of grass-roots groups is that they do not possess influential friends and partners who can sponsor or endorse their applications for funding, or challenge the decisions of government funding bodies not to fund them. State and Federal Government funding bodies, for example, prefer local councils to endorse all local projects for which government funding has been sought. It can be especially disempowering for small community groups when, for example, their local council refuses to endorse or even undermines their applications because the proposed project does not align with council priorities or because it would be competing for the same pool of government funding as a proposed council project. Not only does Local Government receive the lion's share of Federal and State government funding, but it also controls where the leftovers are distributed in communities.

It is not always the case that a council's priorities are comprehensive or compatible with wider community concerns. Communities can be disadvantaged, for example, by incompetent, dysfunctional or short-sighted councils which define their priorities

narrowly. There is no shortage of examples where councils have struggled to recruit high-calibre councillors and council officers. Of course, this has had a serious impact on the performance and overall progress of municipalities. Although in one way or another government funding bodies are usually aware of poorly performing councils, there is little scope for grass-roots community groups to address the consequent problems and deficiencies in their municipalities when government funding bodies are insistent that groups pursuing funding must have their council's blessing. This is not empowering for grass-roots community groups which may differ justifiably in their priorities from their local council.

Another important area where grass-roots community groups and community-minded individuals are excluded is their accessibility to up-to-date information and new knowledge which is obtained from conferences, seminars, workshops and other similar functions. Attendance at these types of events can enhance their understanding of community issues and problems, the strategies being proposed to address them, and provide them with inspiration, encouragement and a better appreciation of their own role in the local community. Importantly, it gives them an opportunity to be exposed to and involved in the wider intellectual discourse about community policy and practice. It provides them also with opportunities to meet and connect with a wide range of other community groups and organisations, including representatives from government and other funding bodies.

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***High registration fees exclude grass-roots members from attending conferences.***

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However, while some forums on community building and related topics are free, usually conferences, seminars and workshops incur a cost – and often a substantial one. More often than not, attending these events is not a realistic proposition for independent community members or members of grass-roots community groups, despite the discounts given by some conference organisers to people who may not be able to afford the full fee. Most often conferences, especially interstate and overseas ones, are the exclusive domain of more senior staff from mainstream organisations, senior practitioners and academics whose conference costs are covered by their employing organisations or their higher salaries.

This problem is exacerbated by the fact that many people involved with community projects such as volunteers maintain full-time jobs in addition to other day-time commitments. Most conferences, seminars and forums on topics relevant to community-building are conducted during the day which effectively prevents the wider participation of community members, other than perhaps retirees, most of whom probably would not be able to afford the high registration fees anyway. Also, not all people who volunteer in community projects have paid employment where they have the freedom to take time off to attend conferences during the day, especially when they maintain jobs not related to their field of volunteer work.

The exclusion of grass-roots sector representatives from conferences and other similar functions raises further serious questions about the validity of efforts to empower and strengthen communities through the involvement of local people. Keeping knowledge about important community matters exclusive to academics, government

workers and professionals from larger mainstream organisations is an elitist approach and keeps the power securely with those who currently have it.

## **WORKER LIMITATIONS**

Facilitating the empowerment of communities is a complex pursuit requiring extensive local as well as wider knowledge about how communities work and the processes involved for them to be empowered. The community work profession in Australia, however, has a number of inherent problems which hinder the empowerment of communities.

Despite its importance, community work in Australia is a neglected profession. Generally, our community workers are untrained or undertrained; have salaries lower than other community service professionals; have limited opportunities for other than basic training in their field of work; lack adequate support and supervision (especially in lone-worker positions); possess a limited career structure; and often have no job security because of limited-tenure jobs attached to short-term community projects.

Community workers need to be multi-skilled professionals, but often their skills are not sufficiently developed to enable them to undertake well enough the wide range of complex tasks involved in their work. As many community workers are faced continually with having to renew their employment, and not always in the same community, it means that they do not have the opportunity to build other than basic knowledge, skills and experience in certain areas of their work. It is difficult for them to develop sound knowledge of one particular community, including forming strong relationships with key people there, or be able to spend long enough in one community and on one project for it to have a major impact.

It does not make sense to commit hundreds of thousands of dollars to a community-building project and offer a low professional salary which, in most instances, will attract to the position someone, albeit brimming with commitment and enthusiasm, with limited experience, knowledge and skills. There is no shortage of big-budget government-funded community projects whose co-ordination is entrusted to inexperienced workers, either with no qualifications or with low-level qualifications. It should be stated, too, that there is no shortage of projects which exploit experienced and well-qualified professional community workers by paying them low salaries.

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### ***An inexperienced community worker may harm a community.***

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In most instances, an inexperienced worker will struggle to deal with the complexities of a community-building project in a neighbourhood characterised, for example, by long-term deprivation, crime, illegal drug use, cultural and other issues, the limited availability of capable, talented and committed local volunteers for project governance, conflict between community members, and between community members and other organisations, including the funded organisation. There is a wide range of other complex issues in which an employed project worker is likely to become enmeshed in communities which are socially fragmented through years of disadvantage. In these types of communities often there is no real sense of community

among residents, so a worker may be severely constrained in gaining local support to make a community-building project work. In some instances, a community worker lacking in the required knowledge (including local knowledge) and skills may contribute to harming a community and its members. For example, it is not uncommon for them to meddle naively in existing productive local relationships or undermine other processes important to the community. Severely disadvantaged communities are fragile constructs whose vulnerability is highly susceptible to being destabilised further by inappropriate or unskilled interference.

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***The first loyalty of a community worker should be to the community and to the local people involved with the project.***

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Another major issue is when project workers are employed by a funded organisation, such as Local Government, to co-ordinate a community-building project involving local residents. The first loyalty of a community worker should be to the community and to the local people involved with the project. True empowerment of local people can only be achieved if the people themselves play a significant role in the process. It must be facilitated and supported rather than tightly controlled or manipulated.

However, holding these views and working in ways that are consistent with them will almost always result in tensions and often conflict between the worker and their employing organisation if the employer defines empowerment and the process to achieve it differently. These organisations, for example, will demand that the worker's first loyalty be to their manager and the organisation. When differences occur between the funded organisation and community people involved with a project, usually it will be the project worker who will be the proverbial 'meat in the sandwich'. If they support their employer's position they may be seen as disloyal to the project and may lose the respect and trust of project members. On the other hand, if they support project members, they may find themselves at loggerheads with their employer. This, of course, in most instances will be a major distraction for the worker; often leading to job dissatisfaction, excessive stress and burnout, almost always a period of sick leave, and occasionally their premature resignation. It will definitely impede the progress of a project.

Another source of tension for community workers is the demands of the funded organisation for excessive accountability (eg. regular report writing in addition to that required by the funding organisation) and compulsory involvement in activities which are not directly to do with the project. It is common for funded organisations to 'steal' staff time from one project and use it for another project or activity. For example, a project worker may have to do a regular stint as an intake worker if the project is auspiced by a short-staffed family support agency.

Often the demands of the funded organisation on project staff are disproportionate to the staffing level of a community project. Some project workers report averaging a half-day a week on activities prescribed by their employer but not directly to do with their project, and up to two or more days a week occasionally when, for example, compulsory staff development, organisation team meetings and supervision all fall in the same week. At best this will be inconvenient for projects and at worst disruptive to their development. The situation is exacerbated when a project worker is employed on a part-time basis.

Whenever a project worker is employed by an organisation to co-ordinate a community-building project, the requirements of the organisation almost always will be prioritised over the direct needs of the community project.

Yet another important issue relates to the common practice of employing project workers on limited-term contracts. Towards the end of their contracts, workers commence a process of psychologically distancing themselves from their projects, which is reinforced by their attempts to actively seek alternative employment. Instead of helping their projects to finish strongly or develop a firm foundation for the future, often in the final months of their contracts workers lose much of their enthusiasm and energy for their current job. Often they resign before the end of their contract period. Understandably, workers with ongoing financial commitments cannot always wait to see out the end of their contracts before locating and commencing their next job.

## **PHONEY PARTNERSHIPS**

Contemporary funding requirements stipulating that applicants for financial support for community projects work in partnership with other community groups has led to the formation of token, insincere and artificially engineered partnerships.

Commonly, alliances and partnerships are formed quickly by the organisation intending to apply for funding with the other partners. When timelines for government funding applications are tight, this contributes to a sense of urgency among applicants. Usually ordinary community people and their neighbourhood groups, if they happen to be included at this early stage of the process, are not quite sure what the project is about and what their roles will be. In most instances, the leading organisation will have already decided on the project's goals, objectives, staffing model and budget which, of course, is inconsistent with the aim of empowering communities through genuinely involving them in all key project planning and decision-making processes.

Often the leading organisation will have some influence over the well being of other parties to the planned arrangement (eg. it already funds them, it is a possible source of funding in the future, it provides in-kind support or promises to) and consequently is able to cajole or exert pressure on groups to acquiesce to proposed partnerships and project directions.

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***Neighbourhood groups are used as pawns to obtain funding.***

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A good example is when some Local Government and other organisations apply for State or Federal Government funding and claim to be doing so in partnership with local community groups. Often these arrangements are partnerships of convenience only and the community groups have little understanding about, genuine involvement in or little influence over project directions. When this occurs, the community groups are simply being used as pawns to obtain funding.

## **GOVERNING OR EMPOWERING?**

Democratically elected governments' mandate to rule gives them the power to make decisions. In a democratic society, however, the trick is to get the balance right between being democratic and being 'less democratic', and when to be which. Balance and timing are where governments seem to struggle with the application of power. Their tendency to use power inconsistently without explanation and their characteristic reluctance to share authority makes their talk of empowering communities appear little more than hollow rhetoric.

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***Empowering communities involves too many players in decision making.***

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Empowering communities implies making them equal partners with governments and funded organisations in decision-making. This process is difficult for governments in particular because it assumes a joint setting of priorities with each partner having a say about the required resourcing. Governments struggle when they have to accommodate a range of perspectives, some of which may be different from their own. Also, while the process may be democratic, it is not necessarily efficient given that it is quicker and less costly to have fewer players involved in decision-making. Importantly, governments which share their power with communities are open to criticism from opposition parties and the media for lacking strong leadership, especially when things go wrong. This situation, therefore, lends itself to governments wanting to restrict and control community involvement in decision-making.

## **EXPERIMENTING ON COMMUNITIES**

Our final point and, in our view, one of the most important relates to the experimental nature of much of our current community building. University research which intends to experiment on humans (even if it is just asking them simple questions in a survey) is scrutinised by specially appointed ethics committees comprising religious, legal, scientific, medical and community representatives. The aim is to ensure that the rights, safety and overall well being of experimental subjects is not jeopardised by the proposed research. The process attempts to establish the competency of the research and of the researchers. In our experience, there are flaws in this system as well, and it does not protect research subjects fully. However, it is a degree of protection put in place by universities to protect people from unethical or poorly planned and conducted research.

No such protection is in place to protect communities and their members when governments and the organisations that they fund install experimental community projects which are poorly planned, lack adequate consultation with ordinary community members beforehand, have insufficient funding and other resources, employ untrained or under-trained community workers, and are too short in duration to achieve any benefits of consequence that are sustainable for the community.

## A CHECKLIST FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

The following simple checklist is by no means complete or inclusive of the infinite range of possible community and project circumstances, but can be used as general guide.

The fundamental principles of community building upon which the checklist is based are (a) the essential involvement of local residents in project ownership, project design and project management; (b) co-operation and collaboration between community groups, including government; (c) facilitation and support by government rather than leadership or control, and (e) sustainable social, economic and environmental benefits.

1. ***Project planning.*** Has sufficient time and effort been made to gain community involvement, especially from the people who live in the community? Have local residents played a major role in planning processes, especially the setting of project priorities, including budget priorities? Is the project sensitive to the needs of different cultural groups within the community? Have employed professional workers adopted a supportive and facilitative role in project planning rather than a directive role? Have all planning processes been transparent? Has the project been planned properly with attention given to the assessment of community needs, incorporating local surveys and community consultations? Have the findings of Australian and overseas research on the community problem to be addressed by the project been examined? Have similar and alternative project approaches been explored? What outcomes have these other projects achieved? Is the project built on a solid knowledge base or mainly guesswork and speculation about what might be successful? Is there a documented plan for the project? Is the plan flexible enough to change direction if additional opportunities emerge, new knowledge comes to hand, and local people who may become involved with the project later on contribute fresh and creative ideas? Does the budget allow for spending on items not anticipated at the commencement of the project? Does the project have plans for a formal evaluation? Will an impartial body evaluate the project?
2. ***Community/project compatibility.*** Has the project been designed especially for the particular community or has it been copied from another community? If it is the latter, are those involved with the project aware of the possible social, cultural, economic and environmental differences which might impact on project outcomes? Do they possess the skills to adapt to their own community a project designed originally for someplace else?
3. ***Availability of local talent.*** Have the knowledge and skills required to make the project effective been identified? Do the people involved currently with the community-building project have the talent, flair and enthusiasm to make it work? Do they have a sound basic knowledge of community-building theory and practice? Do they have project planning skills? Are they prepared to make a long-term commitment to make the project work? Are there talented individuals in the community who should be included in the project, but who have been overlooked thus far?

4. ***Project worker.*** Do the people involved with the project have the knowledge, skills and perceptiveness to employ an appropriately experienced, skilled and committed project worker? Does the interviewing panel include community volunteers who will be involved with the project? Is the project worker well-versed in community-building theory and practice? Do they have excellent communication and writing skills? Do they possess good skills in entrepreneurialism, public relations and fundraising? Do they have a positive attitude towards community volunteers and see them as community colleagues rather than as unskilled participants? Do they have skills in building good relationships with people in the community, professionals and bureaucrats, including the ability to work around the obstructive ones? Do they possess the skills to achieve a balance regarding the competing needs of all those involved with the project, including dealing with the inevitable tensions? Do they have problem-solving and conflict-resolution skills? Do they have the ability to work with wide-ranging personality types, including those difficult to get along with? Do they have the confidence and self esteem to assert themselves with project members when necessary, other project stakeholders, bureaucrats and politicians? Do they have a strong support system in and outside of the project? Is further training available? Do they have access to professional supervision from an experienced community work practitioner?
5. ***Project sustainability.*** What specific plans are in place to ensure that the project and/or its benefits to the community are sustainable? When the inaugural funds for the project are spent, will the positive benefits for the community resulting from the project remain? Is the continuation of the project dependent on a substantial amount of ongoing funding? If so, is there a specific plan to secure additional funding to allow the project to continue? Are there professionals involved with the project who are contributing to the project's vulnerability by not fully involving project volunteers in all key project activities, especially administration and networking? Have efforts been made to build a strong and cohesive team among the people responsible for managing the project, especially the volunteers?
6. ***Skilling community people.*** Are local people being prepared to manage the project effectively by being provided with training in community-building theory and practice, financial management, planning and evaluation, research, human resource management, team-building, networking, public relations and fundraising, public speaking, advocacy, problem-solving, etc? Have funds been allocated in the project's budget for this training?
7. ***Government imposition vs. local community initiative.*** Was project funding sought prior to wide involvement of local residents? Has the project been imposed on the community, or has it emanated mainly from a body of people who live in the community.
8. ***Accountability.*** Are workers employed in the project accountable directly to the residents of the community in which the project operates or to a government body or another organisation which is governed from outside the community? If there is dual accountability for workers, is this well managed or is it lopsided in favour of one body or organisation? Is communication between stakeholders open and frequent? Are accountability requirements disproportionate to the amount of resources and staffing in the project?

9. **Controlling the money.** Who controls the project's money? Does the project's 'banker' have the final say about how project funds will be spent? Do local people possess the skills to manage the project's funds? If not, have they been provided with opportunities to develop the required skills through training and mentoring? If their group does not possess the legal status (ie. incorporation) required for obtaining and administering government and other funding, have they been informed about this option.
  
10. **Decision-making power.** Is the project committee made up mostly of local residents or mainly employed professional and government workers? If the committee is made up of mostly local residents, do the professionals chair meetings, take minutes, dominate discussion and decision-making, and have the final say on the important issues?
  
11. **Local knowledge/local roots.** Do most of the people (especially the decision-makers) associated with the project live locally and do they have an intimate knowledge of the workings of the community?
  
12. **Project morale.** Are spirits high among the people involved in the project? Are they optimistic about the potential benefits for their community? Is the job satisfaction and morale of employed staff high? Do strong relationships exist between those involved with the project, especially between employed project staff and the local residents involved? Does the project maintain good working relationships with other local community organisations? Is there a positive relationship between government authorities and the project? Does the general community feel positive about the project?
  
13. **Spirituality.** Do the project outcomes enhance people's understanding of and sensitivity to the depth and value of their ordinary lives? Do the project co-ordinators and workers give respect and value to the community participants in the project? Is there an articulation of the values and attitudes that underpin the motivation for the project? Is the local community encouraged to explore and discuss these values and attitudes?

## CONCLUSION

For us, this paper is a reflection of our own journey as community workers wanting to contribute to making our communities better places to live, but struggling with the complexities of the task, considering our own competencies, and questioning the adequacy of the tools that governments have made available to us.

Some of the answers to the problems we have highlighted are implicit in our discussion. For those directly involved in building and empowering communities, hopefully reference to the Checklist for Community Building will help.

We encourage all those involved in community building to read and re-read from time to time Sue Kenny's *Developing Communities for the Future* 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition (2006) and Jim Ife's *Community Development* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (2002). We believe that these Australian texts are essential reading for community workers and others involved in community building.