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and the Grassroots Conference**

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**What's Wrong With Community Building II:
It's Much Worse Than We Thought**

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INTRODUCTION

In December 2002 we presented a paper, *What's Wrong with Community Building*, at the Western Australian Local Government Community Services Association conference in Perth. This paper expands on some of the arguments presented in that paper; it includes some examples from our recent personal experiences as well as a basic framework for community building, which is a work in progress.

What's Wrong with Community Building is a statement, but if it was a question the answer would be 'almost everything!'

Government-funded community building in Australia promises to be the cure-all for our community problems. The rhetoric of governments' community policies and programs includes empowering communities, local solutions to local problems, bottom-up decision-making, community capacity building, neighborhood renewal, community regeneration, asset-based community building, social capital building, place management, community strengthening, sustainable communities, resilient communities, triple bottom line and community-business partnerships.

Given the seemingly inexhaustible rhetoric about building, strengthening and renewing, one suspects that maybe Bob the Builder has been seconded to develop Australian governments' new community policies. The associated language about assets and capital, bottom lines and partnerships with business could lead one to think that maybe Eddie the Economist (Bob's cousin), has lent a hand as well.

While there are varying definitions of community building, the following is typical:

Community building is about local people working with government, business and other partners to bring about lasting improvements to the places they live. It aims to foster greater local ownership, social participation, partnerships and more responsive government.

More active and confident communities will generate greater opportunities for sustainable social, economic, cultural and environmental development.

www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au

With its emphasis on working together to build and strengthen communities by empowering local people, the current crop of policies and programs is intuitively appealing. However, we believe that outcomes overall will be disappointing and most benefits gained by communities will be modest and temporary.

Most of the problems, as we see them, relate to the theory and practice of building communities. Some of the players seem to have a much better understanding of the theory than they do its complex practice (government workers and academics are an example). Some have an intuitive understanding of the practice but not the theory (for example, volunteer community workers). Yet others have little understanding of either. In our view, far too many of those involved in community building fall into the latter category.

We do not claim to be experts in the area of community building (if there is such a thing as a community-building expert), but as community workers and citizens we do struggle on a day-to-day basis with the increasingly complex issues and problems facing our communities and we search continually for the solutions. We gather, read and discuss as much of the relevant literature about community as our workloads permit, although it is an ongoing battle to keep up with the proliferation of contemporary literature. We speak to others about community and our networks have widened considerably since we became more familiar with the relationship between social, economic and environmental issues.

We make no apology for the fact that in this paper our analysis is more common sense than it is sophisticated and is based mostly on observation and personal experience rather than on an exhaustive examination of the literature and empirical research.

While our opinions have originated mainly from 'where we sit', we have been influenced variously by some of the writers and commentators who have something to say about 'community', most notably Jim Ife, Noel Pearson, Susan Kenny, Robert Putnam, Eva Cox, John Ralston Saul, Robert Theobald, David Suzuki, Don Edgar, Anita Roddick, Hugh Mackay, Paul Brickell, Anthony Giddens, Barry Jones, John Pilger, Saul Alinsky, Thomas Moore and others.

PROBLEMS WITH UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY BUILDING

In our view, most of the problems with community building are based on a lack of understanding of what it is, and especially how to do it. Our observation has been that often pursuers of government community-building funds are far more skilled in stating project intentions than they are in pursuing project goals.

Government funding bodies seem more interested in efficient cash flow and establishing recipients' ability to administer project funds than they are in determining the capacity of groups to achieve their projects' goals. Knowledge about or a prior track record in community building do not appear to be in the basic mix of criteria used to assess applicants' ability to manage projects. For example, there appears to be an assumption that if an applicant is from local government or a big community organisation, they will possess the relevant knowledge, skills and administrative infrastructure to manage a project well. In our experience, however, while the latter (capable financial administration) may be likely the former (adequate knowledge and skills in community building) is far less likely.

An intention of community building is to enhance the knowledge, skills and experience of people through their participation in the process of community-building. However, with government-funded projects, achieving ambitious community-building outcomes in unrealistically short periods of time is difficult when core knowledge and practical experience are lacking at the start.

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. This includes the community's social, environmental and economic characteristics; its relationships

with other communities; how it relates to the different levels of government; the issues and problems of the community - 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. Importantly, effective community building requires a wide range of community work practice skills.

The unique combination of these factors almost always will 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 community-building projects reach their full potential.

Currently, few attempts appear to be made by government funding bodies to assist funding recipients to achieve their projects' goals either by providing or facilitating basic training in community-building theory and practice, project planning and evaluation, research, financial management, public relations, fundraising, networking, forming partnerships, problem solving, conflict resolution, advocacy, and so on.

PROBLEMS WITH 'DOING TO' COMMUNITIES

The fundamental principles underpinning community building are based largely on approaches which emphasise self-determination and self-reliance, ie. that communities need to be empowered to manage their own affairs, which involves formulating their own solutions and the processes involved to achieve them. The problem with this is that most of the current crop of community-building policies and programs occurs within a strong framework of government priorities, government policies and government processes which have been *imposed on* communities rather than have *emanated from* them.

With little reference to communities beforehand, governments have decided that the community-building approach, most aspects of which seem to have been imported from the United States and the United Kingdom, contains the best strategies to strengthen communities and address their problems. Further, 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. Most application forms for government funding require groups to indicate clearly how their project is compatible with government priorities.

Local Government and bigger non-government agencies have been applying for community-building funding 'on behalf' of communities with little consultation occurring with communities beforehand. Many community-building projects have been imposed on communities and, therefore, have been flawed from the beginning.

Community building is simply another government-driven solution for community problems. Our main concern with this is that the overall failure of successive governments in Australia to have a major impact on serious community problems such as poverty, long-term unemployment, family breakdown and so on indicates that

generally government solutions do not work. Governments, in our view, have a far better understanding of the basic theory of community building than they do its complex practice.

PROBLEMS WITH EMPOWERMENT

Another problem with community building is the idea of governments ‘empowering’ communities. Empowerment is being presented as the cornerstone of community problem solving. The rhetoric of empowerment, such as ‘local solutions to local problems’ and ‘bottom-up decision-making’, is being preached ad nauseam by government workers and echoed parrot fashion by funded groups. Rarely is it clear, however, what they mean by ‘empowerment’. Nowadays the term is used so frequently without definition or with widely varying definitions that at best it is confusing and at worst it has little meaning.

For example, it is not clear what ‘bottom-up decision-making’ means. Normally, most references to being at the bottom have an overriding negative connotation, eg. bottom of the barrel, bottom of the class, rock bottom, etc. In most instances it would seem that being located at the bottom is not a desirable place to be. So, with bottom-up decision-making, is there anything negative being implied about the people at the bottom? Anyway, who are the people at the bottom? Community people? Why have they been assigned the bottom position? Why aren’t they at the top? Who is at the top? Who has decided who is at the bottom and who is at the top? It is doubtful that community people would have chosen to be positioned on the bottom. Why wasn’t a linear model used to describe the roles of government and community in decision making? At least that way communities and governments would be shown as occupying different but equal positions on a decision-making continuum.

Does the language of ‘bottom-up decision-making’ simply reinforce the unequal relationship between government (at the top) and communities (at the bottom)?

To continue the confusion, 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 some kind of limited role in the process? If it is the latter, how much of a role and for what kind of decisions? Is it a genuine opportunity for community members or a token one designed to create an impression of democracy through community participation?

If local people are included in some decision making but excluded from other decision making, are they truly empowered? Is power which is taken by a community stronger and longer lasting than the power which is conferred on them by governments through an orchestrated process such as a community-building program? Can a community be truly empowered if a proportion of its population remains disempowered because of poverty and other disadvantage? Is addressing the structural causes of people’s disadvantage (socio-economic background, culture, income, employment, education, etc.) an inseparable aspect of empowering a community?

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 governments and funding recipients are making few attempts either to ask or answer these kinds of difficult questions.

Also, governments seem to believe that power is a flexible commodity that they can give and then remove as the situation suits. For example, while governments through their community-building policies maintain that they aim to empower communities, they remind communities regularly about how powerless they really are by ignoring or dismissing local opinions on local issues.

It is frustrating and disheartening for enthusiastic community-minded people to have their concerns about local matters dismissed so regularly by governments. Ironically, governments need to have the active support of these same passionate community-minded people for community building to be successful. It is unrealistic, however, to expect enthusiastic responses from them when so many of their views on other matters have been ignored or dismissed.

We do not deny that government decision-making is difficult within current complex social, environmental and economic circumstances. However, often government decision-making processes are not clear to ordinary community people who feel increasingly that in making decisions governments are less than transparent, inconsistent, sometimes deceptive and always politically motivated. While the integrity of governments and their workers may need to be scrutinised from time to time, it is our view that many of the problems with empowerment that we have highlighted in this paper probably are more to do with naiveté than dishonesty.

Whatever empowerment means, history indicates that it is unlikely to be permanent, 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 arbitrarily based on different governments' whims and fancies. Communities also can become empowered or disempowered by events not entirely within their or governments' control, such as an upturn or downturn in the local economy caused by the arrival or withdrawal of industry, decisions made by global markets, and factors such as the weather.

PROBLEMS WITH GOVERNING AND EMPOWERING

Empowering communities implies making them equal partners with governments in decision-making. This process is difficult for governments 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 which are 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 (in theory at least). In a democratic society governments need to be seen to be encouraging community participation in decision-making, but governments which share their power with communities leave themselves open to criticism for lacking strong leadership, especially when communities under

perform or make mistakes which inevitably reflect badly on the government involved. Therefore, community participation has to be restricted and carefully (and often craftily) controlled.

Of course 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.

PROBLEMS WITH RE-EMPOWERING

Further compounding the problem of empowerment is the belief that communities which have been disempowered previously can be re-empowered later. This approach presupposes a high level of resilience in communities. Communities, however, can be fragile constructs. For example, communities which have been battered by negative social and economic change can become increasingly vulnerable, discouraged, depressed and pessimistic about the possibility of recovery. New government community-building initiatives which promise to solve community problems are unlikely to be greeted enthusiastically in these communities.

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 government solutions are common.

PROBLEMS WITH EXCLUDING GRASS-ROOTS GROUPS

Another problem that we have observed in applying community-building policy to practice is that often it excludes important individuals and groups who are essential to effective community building, especially those from the grass-roots sector.

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, in one way or another, have highlighted repeatedly 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.

Government support inaccessible

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. Also, as wide community networking among groups has decreased, especially in bigger communities, often larger mainstream groups are not aware of the existence of some smaller groups.

Even when small groups are informed about the opportunities for government support, often funding application processes impede rather than assist their efforts. Application processes in particular 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.

Application forms, despite recent attempts to make them simpler, are still confusing and sometimes daunting to groups uninitiated in the process of applying for government funds. It has been our experience when we have been asked by small groups to help them with their applications that they do not understand the accompanying Information for Applicants documentation, they misinterpret questions easily and sometimes they are confounded totally by the process.

Often small groups do not have formally stated business or strategic plans, annual reports or constitutions, all of which commonly are required by funders. Many small groups do not possess influential friends and partners who can sponsor or endorse applications for funding or challenge the decisions of governments not to fund them.

Often small community groups, especially those which are operated by just one or a couple of people, are deemed suspect or 'tin-pot shows' by government funding bodies hesitant to take risks with funding. It has been our observation that individuals and very small groups which operate independently can do remarkable work in their communities. However, they are unable to obtain financial support to cover their basic operating costs from overly cautious governments which have defined eligibility very narrowly, which want to avoid incurring the associated administrative costs of funding a plethora of different groups, and which gain greater political mileage from supporting bigger and higher-profile community organisations.

Impersonal administrative processes

The length of time it takes government funding bodies to assess proposals and applications can be many months and shows a lack of understanding about the essence and motivation of small community groups. Often the main driving forces for small groups are members' enthusiasm for and commitment to their causes. The proposed projects for which they are seeking financial support are connected intrinsically to their values and beliefs about how the community in which they live can be improved. For them, their application for government support is not simply an impersonal administrative process, but often it is treated as such by funding bodies. For example, commonly governments take many months to decide not to fund a group, with no encouragement given or constructive feedback provided either during or after the process. This can be severely demoralising for small groups which may feel that as a consequence their worth to their community has been devalued and their

visions, as reflected in their application for funding, judged by government to be without merit.

Even groups which do get funded sometimes have to wait excessive amounts of time for funding. One of the authors of this paper assisted a group to apply for government community-building funding and the group had to wait for 16 months from the time of its initial expression of interest to receiving the first instalment of funding. It may have been more efficient administratively and more politically advantageous for government to announce successful applicants en masse and with fanfare. Long delays in funding, however, indicate that funding bodies possess little understanding about grass-roots community groups.

Excessively long delays (eg. 12 months or more) between an application and receiving funding assume that groups are able (or want to) continue with their project. In grass-roots groups, for example, often projects are inspired and motivated by the personal interests, abilities and availability of individual staff/volunteers rather than by the active and ongoing pursuit of strategic objectives. The authors' observation has been that when these staff leave, temporarily or permanently, or become involved with other priorities and projects (as one might expect over 12 months or more), the groups are less able to accommodate the projects for which they have sought funding.

Given most community groups' reluctance to reject financial support, often a delayed offer of funding is still accepted but usually in less-than-ideal circumstances for the proposed project. An all-too-common consequence is that projects are not given the priority initially intended and their full potential is never reached.

Restrictive funding processes

Without prior warning, groups offered funding can be confronted by restrictive and disempowering funding arrangements, whose requirements contradict the stated empowerment-oriented aims of the funding program. For example, both authors of this paper have been involved recently in government-funded community-building projects where it has been a requirement that groups grant a licence to government to have unrestricted use of any written material produced through the funded projects.

The relevant funding agreement clause was:

...the funding recipient grants to the Commonwealth a perpetual, irrevocable, non-exclusive licence (including a right to sublicense) to use, reproduce, publish, adapt, modify, and exploit any existing material for the purposes of the project and any Commonwealth purposes.

One group which was offered \$15,000 for its project refused to accept the condition and, if necessary, was prepared to reject the funding as well. It maintained that 'licence' as described in the funding agreement really meant 'copyright' which it was not prepared to grant to government, especially given that government funds were sought only for printing costs rather than for the costs of the authors' labour in writing project literature. Eventually the government funding body removed the requirement from the funding agreement.

The second group was offered \$120,000, and was under some local pressure to agree to the requirement to facilitate the receipt of funding, although it did so reluctantly. Currently, a representative of the group is having discussions with the relevant government department about renegotiating the funding agreement to have the licensing clause removed.

Important knowledge inaccessible

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. Also, it provides them with opportunities to meet and connect with a wide range of other community groups and organisations, including representatives from government and other funding bodies.

As mentioned previously, not being on mainstream information mailing lists contributes to their exclusion, but another important contributor is the prohibitive cost of attending such events. 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. 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.

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 government workers and professionals from larger mainstream organisations is an elitist approach and keeps the power securely with those who currently have it. It is not uncommon, for example, for community policies to have their origin at conferences where government policy makers or advocates from larger non-government community agencies are inspired by particular speakers or prompted by both formal and informal discussion among participants. Rarely do people from the grass-roots sector have the opportunity to participate in the earliest stages of community policy formation.

While there is a general assumption, and sometimes a formal expectation by employers, that conference participants will pass on what they have learned to others, it is not common for the new knowledge to be passed all the way to people at the grass-roots level in communities.

It does not make sense to deprive people of knowledge which is crucial to their efforts to build their communities. Through missing out on important knowledge and up-to-date information (not just from conferences), sometimes local people are ill-equipped to make the best possible decisions for their communities. It is not uncommon for

local problem-solving and decision-making to be based on a limited grasp of the issues and insufficient knowledge of the possible solutions.

PROBLEMS WITH LANGUAGE

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 folk are not. Because the former are confronted with the language of community building daily, they use it instinctively. To hear them speak to community people about building social capital, increasing their community's capacity in a sustainable way, and renewing their neighborhoods is sometimes amusing, but mostly it is concerning. Language is the vehicle which mediates values and culture and thereby provides the description for people's experiences and reality. 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.

Compounding this problem is that many government workers and professional community workers appear to have only a very basic understanding of the actual concepts behind the language they are using. Consequently, often they struggle to explain the concepts adequately in layperson's terms to uninitiated people.

In his book *Death Sentence The Decay of Public Language* (2003), Don Watson describes the behaviour of parrots when in unfamiliar territory:

On finding any other horde they try to blend in by mimicking its members. They do as the Romans do. If it is a Catholic household in which they find themselves, they might recite Hail Marys, among blasphemers they'll blaspheme, where it is customary to curse the dog or tap the barometer, they curse the dog or tap the barometer. Whatever is most frequently repeated sounds to them definitive, and this is the one they imitate... Parrots never learn the language, but are smart enough to know, like people involved in marketing, that one or two catch phrases will satisfy most people.

We have observed that to curry favour with government and professional community workers, or even just to communicate better with them by using common language, community people mimic the rhetoric, but often without really understanding it. Before long, a common language of community-building language is being used. Because, however, the various people involved have a different or limited understanding of the concepts and terminology, sometimes the exchanges between them have little meaning. Without a shared understanding of the issues and a common language to communicate about them, it is almost impossible to engage in effective community building.

A good example of problems with language is the extended discussion/debate about 'deliberative democracy' which occurred recently (March 2004) on the New South Wales Premiers Department communitybuilders website. The initiator of the debate commented (17/3/2004):

...in terms of deliberative democracy, where are the women's voices? Is the language too exclusive or are you all too busy keeping 'civil society' happening? As we are 80% of the sector and the main users of community organisations and the main volunteers for community services, I think we need to be in this debate!

The answer was best put by another contributor to the discussion (17/3/2004) - one of the 'women's voices' referred to:

...as an ordinary community member I find so much of this discussion is airy, academic and not understandable!!! I thought everyone today understood the need to communicate in plain English. Unless there's a commonality here there will never be democracy.

PROBLEMS WITH COMMUNITY SPIRIT

Community spirit, among other things, involves residents having a feeling of belonging in their town or region, having pride in and enthusiasm for their community and feeling that they have personal responsibility for its well being. It involves also a desire to become involved co-operatively with other local people who share similar feelings about their community.

In this regard, another weakness with community-building is that it relies substantially on the presence of or the capacity to build strong community spirit. Currently there are a number of serious hurdles in the way of building or re-building strong community spirit in many Australian communities.

Dismantling community infrastructure

The dismantling of key community infrastructure by governments and businesses has caused severe damage to community spirit in many towns and regions. For example, the withdrawal from these communities of banks and other private industry, schools, hospitals, health and welfare agencies, post offices and other government offices has played a major role in eroding community spirit. These types of institutions bring people together, support and connect them in a variety of ways, and bring about the formation and maintenance of socially cohesive communities.

Competing for government contracts

Doing further damage to community spirit has been governments forcing community groups doing similar work to be more competitive in vying for government contracts. Apart from instances where groups have collaborated to tender for government contracts, commonly it has meant community groups becoming individualistic and secretive to win contracts.

As well as creating strong rivalry in some communities, the tendering process has brought out the worst in some groups which appear to have adopted 'rubbery' principles in order to pursue and receive funding from any source, virtually by any means and subject to any conditions. Accounts are common of community groups using underhanded tactics in competing for government contracts. As a result, the level of trust has been eroded among groups in many communities and permanent damage done to community relationships.

Trust is an integral part of good working relationships between community groups. It takes time to develop; it can be fragile and as a result it can be damaged easily. Trust is not a commodity that can be manipulated in the way that governments have through creating intense competitiveness between groups.

Often what is lost through competitiveness is the sense of solidarity that is required to advocate for each other and the broader community. It is doubtful whether strong competitive spirit and strong community spirit can co-exist in a community-building context among groups doing the same or similar work.

Growing disadvantage

Further contributing to the difficulties in building community spirit are the growing numbers of disadvantaged people in communities. As more people experience severe hardship, especially through low income and the associated pressures and difficulties, they become more inward looking rather than community minded. This erodes community spirit. Usually, people living in severely impoverished circumstances are preoccupied with meeting their own basic needs for survival, and are less inclined to take an active interest in wider community concerns and join in with others to address them. Simply inviting them to become involved without addressing the fundamental causes of their disadvantage is unlikely to increase their participation and personal sense of community spirit, other than perhaps temporarily.

Ignoring community opinion

Another contributor to a lessening of community spirit is governments' continued failure in recent times to listen to or act upon community opinion. Through having their concerns about local matters ignored or dismissed by governments, local people have become frustrated, demoralised and sceptical about the possibility of change. Now many people feel that they have little influence over government decision making, so do not bother to even try. For many otherwise community-minded people, passive concern about local issues is about the best that they can muster nowadays.

Growing indifference

Some people are deterred from involvement in their communities because they feel overwhelmed by the complexity of local issues. Others choose not to be involved because governments have downplayed the seriousness of problems or, in talking up their achievements, have suggested that they have problems in hand.

However, in a world which is experiencing rapid and often unpredictable change, where it is apparent that the best imaginable as well as the worst imaginable can become a reality overnight, life has become more uncertain and more demanding for people. As a consequence, people generally (not just those experiencing severe disadvantage) seem to have become more inward looking and less actively concerned about the plight of others outside their own circle of family and friends. Examples abound of growing community indifference and tolerance to the hardship, deprivations and breaches of human rights experienced by many people. While logically this situation makes it an ideal time to be concerned with building community spirit and caring for others, the pre-conditions are far from ideal.

PROBLEMS WITH SHORT TERMISM

Another major problem with community building is its preoccupation with pursuing short-term outcomes. 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 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 be realistically achieved.

Almost always government solutions overlook the fact that to build strong communities and to address major problems, sustained efforts over many years are required. 'Long term' for politicians and bureaucrats, however, seems to mean the length of a project's relatively brief funding period, the duration of their government's term in office or the length of their own employment contracts.

Often governments have been too hasty to abandon community programs when they fail to achieve expected outcomes within unreasonably short timelines. Twelve-month programs or one-off grants do little more than dabble in community building unless they are a forerunner to more sustainable approaches.

Another problem is that major overhauls of community policies and programs every time there is a change in government is not an effective way to strengthen 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. When governments change, local communities can be harmed by the post-election withdrawal of community projects, especially ones which have proven to be effective or have entailed extensive community involvement and substantial use of local resources.

PROBLEMS WITH PROJECT EVALUATION

Government funding bodies appear confused about the difference between intentions, processes and outcomes. Literature promoting governments' community policies and programs is strong on highlighting the intentions of funded projects but weak on revealing if intended outcomes have been achieved. One of the reasons for this is that outcomes, especially the failure to achieve them, expose governments to public criticism where good intentions are less likely to bring disapproval. Another more basic reason, however, is that often governments simply do not know if funded projects' goals have been achieved.

Commonly funding agreements require groups to provide final reports on project outcomes before anything of significance has been achieved, especially with projects pursuing long-term goals. As a result, often groups' final reporting focuses on intentions and processes instead of outcomes. Examining processes is important, but a good process does not always lead to a good outcome. Therefore, evaluating processes without examining outcomes can be a meaningless exercise in terms of identifying effective community-building strategies.

One of the recent community-building projects with which the authors have been involved has been required to provide evidence of outcomes in a final report within six months of receiving the first instalment of funding. The project has a community education focus entailing increasing the knowledge, changing the attitudes and behaviour of a target group firmly entrenched in its ways. While the government funding body lagged behind in its schedule to distribute funding to groups, its deadline for final reporting remained the same. The best the funded group can do in its final report is to restate the project's intentions and processes rather than provide an account of outcomes.

The result of this approach to evaluating government-funded community building is that we are deprived of a body of knowledge about what works (and what does not work). Successive generations of government, community groups and community workers search continually for the answers to community problems, largely unaware of the outcomes of previous strategies.

PROBLEMS WITH DISHONEST REPORTING

Another problem relating to project evaluation is the accuracy of reporting. Often reporting is little more than a public relations exercise for community groups and does not reflect the true state of progress and success of projects. Funded groups, keen to promote themselves with government and the community as capable, are adept at talking up their achievements and playing down their failures. This practice is unofficially condoned by governments which benefit politically from the promotion of successful projects and gain little from the exposure of the not-so-successful ones.

The authors are aware of a major government-funded community-building project which seems to have been a fiasco from its commencement, but it is located in a marginal electorate where bad publicity for government, especially in an election year, must be avoided. This project has been in damage control almost since its

inception, with continuing attempts made to normalise project dysfunction with references to ‘expected hurdles’, ‘ongoing challenges’ and ‘minor setbacks’. Documented accounts of the project’s progress reveal nothing of the seriousness of its problems.

Project evaluation is aimed at providing a range of stakeholders, not the least of which are other groups and other communities wanting to develop similar community-building projects, with the opportunity to see what works, to benefit from and build upon the experience of others and, importantly, to avoid making the same mistakes. This is not achievable when project evaluation lacks integrity.

PROBLEMS WITH FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY

Potentially good community projects should not be judged ineligible for government support because auspicing groups cannot produce a financial sustainability plan for when the government funding period ends. Sometimes there are no realistic alternatives to government funding for good community projects, especially those involving larger amounts of money. It does not make sense for governments to reject potentially good community projects or to discontinue supporting very successful ones after the end of a limited period of funding if the community group has been unable to locate an alternative source of financial support.

Although governments have encouraged community groups to pursue partnerships with business as an alternative source of funding, often this is not a viable option for smaller groups. It is unrealistic for governments to expect small groups to raise large amounts of funding from the business sector when competition for funding from the latter is so strong. Bigger and relatively well-resourced community groups are much better placed to win support from business. Also, business groups, especially big businesses, usually prefer to support larger, higher-profile groups which can enhance their reputation as socially responsible companies. This is referred to as cause-related marketing and brand building. Many grass-roots community groups are barely known beyond their own small neighborhoods and, therefore, are of little use as marketing tools for companies. While it is true that smaller community-based businesses may be more inclined to support smaller community groups, smaller companies have fewer resources to share.

One of the great strengths of small community groups is that usually they are able to operate efficiently because of low overheads, especially low staffing overheads. Commonly, though, they do not have the required number of personnel or the necessary financial resources to embark upon a fundraising program for their projects, especially for bigger projects involving larger amounts of money. Small community groups and their projects should not be seen as inadequate and deemed ineligible for government support because of their inability to fundraise.

Governments want communities to achieve greater financial self-reliance through community building, but even if this is possible to achieve with particular projects, the process cannot be rushed and certainly not at a predetermined, universal and unrealistic pace set by government policy which takes no account of unique project and community circumstances.

PROBLEMS WITH OVERSEAS SOLUTIONS

Despite the new catchcry 'local solutions to local problems', governments in Australia have a long tradition of importing solutions for local problems from overseas. This is despite the fact that almost every community in Australia has examples of successful community-building. They are not necessarily government funded nor is information about them conveniently located on the internet or in easily accessible reports from auspicing agencies or universities.

The first problem with overseas solutions is that some community-building strategies seem to have been imported prior to sufficient evidence being obtained that they have achieved any more than modest, short-term outcomes. It would appear that governments in Australia have spent more time pursuing community-building ideas from overseas which sound like they might work rather than searching for strong evidence that they actually do work. As indicated earlier, governments confuse intentions and processes with outcomes which contributes to this problem.

Some of the main assumptions underpinning imported community-building strategies appear to be that they are universally suitable and better than 'home-grown' varieties. Neither is always the case, however, as community programs designed overseas are tailored for unique social, economic and environmental circumstances. This does not mean that we cannot learn and benefit from them, including adapting them to suit local conditions.

It would appear, though, that often overseas community programs are seen as readymade solutions so that when they are transplanted here, insufficient thought is given to the wide cultural and community differences and how these might impact on the expected outcomes. In most instances, community building from country to country will share similar principles, but local differences require individual strategies to be interpreted and applied quite differently.

PROBLEMS WITH SOCIAL RESEARCHERS AND CONSULTANTS

Although not a new problem, but one about which communities and community builders need to be ever vigilant, is the potential damage that can be done to communities by visiting researchers and consultants.

We are not criticising social research and information gathering for the purpose of undertaking needs studies, evaluating projects and informing community policy and practice, although in our opinion it is questionable sometimes who benefits most from social research and consultancies. In this instance, our concern is about the ignorance and insensitivity of some researchers and consultants and the resulting effects on communities.

We assume it is likely that most researchers and consultants are not ignorant or insensitive, nor do they damage or exploit intentionally the communities which are the focus of their interest. However, we have become aware of a couple of recent instances where the involvement of consultants has had a major negative impact on communities. In the most serious instance, through the process and aftermath of a

project evaluation, the community-building work of local groups and individuals was disrupted significantly; irreparable injury was done to vital community relationships; the reputation of an important community group was damaged; and the health and well being of some of its members affected adversely.

It is not our view that harm was inflicted intentionally by the visiting consultants, although we suspect that their overly negative final report may have been influenced partly by an earlier falling out between one of the consultants and some of the community members involved. We concluded that for the most part the damage done by the consultants was caused partly by their ignorance about the town's local politics, the various personalities and their individual agendas (in this case the consultants appear to have got 'sucked in'), and partly by what we believe was their lack of understanding about grass-roots community-building processes, especially one of the fundamentals of organic community development (ie. sometimes it takes as long as it takes).

In our view, this led to major blunders with the selection and application of evaluation measures with the consequence that the conclusions reached were seriously flawed. The evaluation report lacked tact and diplomacy and while some of the report's criticisms were valid, in our opinion most of them were groundless and not supported by the flimsy evidence presented.

Despite this, the impact on the community was considerable. In particular, as a direct result of the report the reputation of one of the town's key figures and his family was damaged to the point that they felt their position in the local community was not possible to maintain. His career, health and general well being and the health of his wife suffered greatly as a result. This person is one of the most experienced, talented and committed community workers that we have encountered. His local knowledge, extensive networks with all levels of government and community, and his extensive list of achievements spanning nearly 30 years would be difficult to match in our view.

We were particularly concerned by the consultants' apparent inability to fully anticipate the devastating effects of their sharp-edged final report on the community and this person, who was named in the report.

It is accepted practice for researchers and social commentators to be critical in their published work. There is a major difference, however, between commenting disparagingly about inadequate government policy and under-performing senior public officials and being openly critical of unsuspecting and often defenceless small communities, community groups and individuals.

Communities, especially vulnerable ones, are fragile constructs and can be damaged easily and sometimes permanently. Also, effective community building relies substantially on the talent, commitment and enthusiasm of local individuals as well as on the trusting relationships which develop between them. Characteristically, these individuals are fragile as well and can be hurt easily.

In most instances, being critical publicly of local personalities and interfering in the relationships between them must be a 'no-go zone' for researchers and consultants

who are short-term visitors. Criticisms, if they need to be made, must be handled with considerable care.

It is important for visiting researchers and consultants to be aware that as unsuspecting newcomers they can be manipulated by local individuals seeking to improve their own position in local organisations and communities. It is not uncommon for the views expressed by these politically motivated individuals, which are not necessarily accurate or representative, to be given more prominence than is warranted by consultants keen to 'beef up' or 'spice up' their reports.

Visiting researchers and consultants need to be aware that their reputation as experts adds significant weight to their views and criticisms. As experienced writers and speakers, they can articulate their views in ways which maximise the impact of their arguments and recommendations on their target audiences. Strong criticisms can be artfully implied without being clearly stated. Aspersions can be skilfully cast on the performance and reputations of individuals without treading on libellous ground.

American media magnate William Randolph Hearst once said to his newspaper reporters *'Don't be afraid to make a mistake, your readers might like it.'* Needs studies and evaluation reports should be well written but the authors are not tabloid journalists sacrificing honest reporting for titillation and sensationalism. It may be artful to proceed in this way, but it can be very destructive for communities. It is irresponsible, unethical and even cowardly of researchers and consultants after they have departed to drop potentially devastating 'bombshells' on vulnerable communities through their reports and not be accountable for the resulting fallout.

Conservationists speak about leaving small footprints when they visit environmentally sensitive areas. Social researchers and consultants should adhere to this maxim when visiting vulnerable communities.

PROBLEMS WITH COMMUNITY WORK

As we have maintained, effective community building is a complex pursuit requiring extensive local as well as universal knowledge about how communities work. Apart from the problems with current community building practice which we have highlighted thus far, there are a number of major problems confronting professional community workers which have a strong bearing on their ability to engage in effective community building.

Despite its importance, community work in Australia is a neglected profession. More often than not 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 limited-tenure jobs attached to short-term community projects are an intrinsic characteristic of their profession.

Generally community workers are 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 community building. Because many community workers are faced continually with having to renew their employment, it means that they do not always have the opportunity to build other than basic knowledge, skills and experience in certain areas of their work, develop sound knowledge of one particular community, or be able to spend long enough in one community on one project for it to have a major impact.

Also, effective community work is dependent on developing strong relationships with key people in the employing community. This is difficult to do when a worker has to move from community to community on a frequent or regular basis to seek employment. Short-term employment contracts do not allow workers to get to know an individual community intimately, or to develop the types of strong relationships required to maximise community-building efforts.

Despite their experience, skills, enthusiasm and commitment to their field of work, newly appointed community workers who have come from another community start a long way behind equivalent workers who either live in or have worked in the employing community for a number of years.

PROBLEMS WITH EXCLUDING SPIRITUALITY

There are many people today who consider spirituality a critical component of their overall health and wellbeing and their connectedness within their community. Yet the community-building policy and literature with which we are familiar tends to ignore the relevance of spirituality for thinking about community. We need to ask what are the sources we use in reflecting about community and where is the gap?

There are a number of sources that we draw on to help us understand the experience of people in communities, and specifically the way in which people's sense of community is shaped. Among these sources are sociology, psychology, economics and philosophy. However there is another source, often neglected, which may be equally as important as the others - theology.

Theology, simply defined, is faith seeking understanding. There are many people who seek to understand their life experience in their community within a faith context. For these people the results of their endeavors strengthen their sense of connectedness to their community and identify what they may be capable of achieving as human beings.

Theological reflection can situate the immediate experiences of people's lives and their sense of who they are within a broader context of meaning. People can become acutely aware of being connected to others by means of a long and rich tradition, as well as of being surrounded by love and support in times of shared suffering. They realise that theirs is an inheritance of a history and culture which must be nurtured by the celebration of both a shared memory and hope for the future.

It is suggested that the sense a people have of their potential goodness far outweighs the worst evil anyone may perpetrate, together with the lived experience of sharing the suffering and being compassionate, supportive and hopeful, is a potent force for healing and building community.

Theology is a source which argues that the human person is not simply engaged in an individual exercise of self-actualisation or even self-fulfillment. The choices made are not ones that are necessarily practical but are based on what is the faithful and responsible response. This counters strongly notions of individualism, self-interest, market forces and so on. It is a source which allows thinking about community to include notions of love, caring, attachment, responsibility and hope. This is precisely the language we have tended to migrate (away) from in favour of the perceived stronger, impersonal language emanating from the market ideology. We need to recapture the language of the heart!

A FRAMEWORK FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

The following framework is a work in progress. It is by no means complete or inclusive of the infinite range of possible community and project circumstances, but can be used as general guide for community building.

The fundamental principles of community building upon which the framework is based are (a) the pivotal 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 effort been made to gain community involvement, especially from the people who live in the community? Have local residents played *the* 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 guessing and speculating about what might work? 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 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 simply because their job requires it and their commitment to and involvement with the community and the project will end when they leave their jobs? Are these people contributing to the project's vulnerability by not fully involving participating residents of the community 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?
5. **Skilling community people.** What specific plans are there to prepare local people to manage the project effectively, eg. training in community-building theory and practice, financial management, planning and evaluation, research, human resource management, team-building, public relations/fundraising, public speaking, advocacy, problem-solving, etc? Have funds been allocated in the project's budget for this training? Depriving local people of essential knowledge and skills in project management prevents them from assuming effective leadership roles in community building.
6. **Government imposition vs. local community initiative.** Was project funding sought by a government or non-government organisation (eg. a health, welfare or other agency) prior to wide involvement of local residents? Has the project been imposed on the community, or has it emanated mainly from a representative body of people who live in the community. If it is the latter, essential community interest and participation are likely; if it is the former, limited and short-lived interest from local people is probable, especially when initial funding is spent and the contracts of employed staff end and they leave the project and/or the community.
7. **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. If it is the latter, generally the priorities of the government/other body will prevail rather than those of the

community. Government/other body priorities are not always the same as community priorities, despite their claims to the contrary.

8. ***Controlling the money.*** Who controls the project's money? Local community people need to have responsibility for the determination of financial priorities. Have they chosen to allocate responsibility for the administration of project funds to another organisation or has government or another organisation assumed this role without prior consultation? As a general rule, whoever has control of project spending will control the project. If local people do not possess the skills to manage the project's funds, they should be provided with opportunities to develop the required skills through training/mentoring. If their group does not possess the legal status (ie. incorporation) required for obtaining and administering government funding, they should be assisted to achieve this if it is what they want.
9. ***Decision-making power.*** Is the project committee made up mostly of local residents or mainly employed professional workers? If it is mainly professional workers, the project is community building in name only. If the committee is made up of mostly local residents, but the professionals chair meetings, take minutes, dominate decision-making or have the power of veto, the success of the project will be limited.
10. ***Local knowledge/local roots.*** Do most of the people (especially the decision-makers) associated with the project live locally and do they have an intrinsic knowledge of the community? Community-building projects will be severely disadvantaged by participants unfamiliar with the intimate workings of a community. It can take years to develop essential local knowledge for effective community building.
11. ***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 local community organisations? Is there a positive relationship between government authorities and the project? Does the general community feel positive about the project?
12. ***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

This paper highlights only a small number of the problems associated with community building as we see them. After commencing to write and then discuss with one another what we had written as we progressed, it became clear that the handful of concerns we had thought about including initially represented only the proverbial ‘tip of the iceberg’. Of course, this is not an uncommon experience for writers and researchers. In addition, it became clear to us that most issues that we had identified originally were far more complicated than we had first anticipated - also not an unusual experience.

For us, this paper is a reflection of our own journey as community workers wanting to help with the process of making our communities better places to live, but struggling with the complexities of the task, considering our own competencies (or rather, lack of them), and questioning the validity of the tools that governments have made available to us and the hurdles they have placed in our way. This paper has provided us with an opportunity to recognise some of the ‘errors of our ways’, and to amend some of our old, well-intentioned but misguided ideas and methods. It has become clear to us that we still have more amending to do.

While we have been critical about government community building policy and processes, we do not believe that government-funded community building is without merit completely. We believe that current policies and programs will provide people with opportunities to develop their communities and to address local issues and problems. The ingenuity of local people who are enthusiastic about and committed to their communities can never be underestimated. Even with the most basic of materials and rudimentary tools, talented, passionate and determined people will create or build something that will benefit their community.

However, we believe also that the problems highlighted in this paper are significant barriers to government-funded community building achieving major and enduring positive change in communities. We have not underestimated the benefits of minor changes and small successes for communities, but so many of the current issues and problems facing our towns require a long-term commitment to major change.

Sometimes these types of papers conclude with recommendations for radical and often unrealistic changes to the status quo. We have resisted that option on the basis of it not being helpful to readers or to us. We have shared our framework for community building which is a work in progress.

We would like to conclude by inviting you on a journey of self-discovery with us. We encourage you to examine the processes, structures and language which underpin your engagement with communities. Above all, we urge you not to ignore the passion, creativity, spirit and soul of the communities within which you work.

We encourage all those involved in community building to read Jim Ife’s *Community Development* 2nd Edition (2002). We believe that this enlightening text describes ideally but realistically how effective community building can occur. Chapter 5, *Change from below*, and Chapter 6, *The process of community development*, are especially relevant to this paper’s content.

We are happy to be contacted to discuss further any of the issues presented in this paper, to hear about your experiences and learn about your projects, and to share with you some of the current ideas and projects with which we are involved. Our contact details are:

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS

John Murphy is manager of Mornington Peninsula Community Connections, an independent and free advisory service for small grass-roots community groups on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria. Established in 1997, originally the service was funded by The Body Shop in Australia. Now the service is funded privately by businessman (and qualified social worker) Barrie Thomas, former co-owner of The Body Shop in Australia and now owner of The Body Shop in New Zealand.

Community Connections provides advice and support to small community agencies with program planning and evaluation, policy development, public relations, fundraising, staff recruitment and training, social action and a variety of other areas relevant to their work.

John worked for 10 years in the printing industry before obtaining a Bachelor of Social Work (Hons.) in 1981 and a PhD in 1992 from Monash University. John's social work background was in child and family services and community work.

He was employed for seven years as a lecturer in the Department of Social Work at Monash University where he taught community agency management and community work.

Prior to his position at Monash University, John was co-ordinator of Frankston Community Support and Information Centre – a grass-roots agency established and staffed by community volunteers. After leaving employment at the Centre he remained on the management committee for six years, five of which he was chairman.

Joe Cauchi has been with the Mornington Peninsula Shire as Director of Sustainable Communities for five years. The group has responsibility for children, youth and family services; aged care and disability; recreation and culture; and libraries. Also part of the group's portfolio is The Briars historical homestead and the Regional Gallery. Prior to joining the Mornington Peninsula Shire, Joe was in a similar role at the City of Boroondara.

In 1990, Joe worked at the Family Court of Australia as Regional Director of Counselling and had responsibility for the Southern Region of the Court that included South Australia, Tasmania and Canberra.

Between 1982 and 1990, Joe worked with a number of non-government agencies including the Mission of St James and St John (now Anglicare) and the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau. He also spent a brief period with the Shire of Hastings before council amalgamations. Joe worked in child welfare with the Children's Aid Society – a non-government statutory child welfare agency between 1973 and 1982 in Toronto, Ontario where he completed his social work training.

He gained a Bachelor of Arts at Monash in 1973, Bachelor of Social Work (Hons.) from York University in 1976 and his Master of Social Work from the University of Toronto in 1982. In 1992, Joe gained a Bachelor of Theology from the Catholic Theological College in Melbourne.