

**C**ommunity capacity building has become a central objective in a wide range of public policies and programs in Australia. Most analysts and practitioners in the human services field would count this as a positive development despite the fact that the concept of "community capacity" is seldom precisely defined in these policies and programs, and measures to indicate whether or not it has been "built" are only in the developmental stage.

## **Coming to grips with the concept**

Some useful short definitions of "community capacity" in the literature include:

- the degree to which a community can develop, implement and sustain actions which allow it to exert greater control over its physical, social, economic and cultural environments (Littlejohns and Thompson 2001);
- the ability of individuals, organisations and communities to manage their own affairs and to work collectively to foster and sustain positive change (Howe and Cleary 2001);
- a holistic representation of capabilities (those with which the community is endowed and those to which the community has access), plus the facilitators and barriers to realisation of those capabilities in the broader social environment (Jackson et al. 1977).



# Community capacity building explained

Community capacity building has become a central objective in a wide range of public policies and programs in Australia.

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On a more concrete level, one application of the concept of capacity building in the health promotion field (Hawe et al. 2000) has defined it in terms of (at least) three activities:

- building infrastructure (to deliver programs);
- building partnerships and organisational environments (to help sustain programs and “gains” or positive outcomes);
- building problem-solving capability in communities and systems (to ensure appropriate responses to new problems in unfamiliar contexts).

Community capacity building, as both a concept and a strategy, has relevance to all communities and to society as a whole (as evidenced in discussions around “social capital” and “the third sector”). It is, however, most commonly applied to *disadvantaged* communities and population groups. This is belated acknowledgement that the profound economic restructuring and social change of the last decades of the 20th century has had a very uneven impact – benefiting some individuals and communities, while harming others.

The promotion of community capacity building recognises that these continuing economic and social transformations will result in an increasingly divided society with even more deeply entrenched pockets of disadvantage in the 21st

century – unless new and more effective interventions change the trajectory.

## Old wine or new?

In one sense, the ideas behind community capacity building are not new. From the 1970s in Australia there has been a strong “community development” school in the not-for-profit sector aimed at fostering the ability of people to take greater control over their lives and environments through working together for common goals. Many of the aspirations, processes and strategies of community development are also found in the current manifestations of community capacity building.

Some would argue that there is no difference between the older concept of “community development” and newer concept of “community capacity building” (other than the packaging), and that capacity building was always at the heart of good community development practices.

Others believe that, while there is a continuum, a qualitative shift has occurred because community capacity building:

- places a much greater emphasis on a tri-partite, cross-sector approach to tackling social and economic issues (particularly on the involvement of business and the private sector in collaborative work);

- poses a greater challenge to all three tiers of government (but particularly the federal government) with its explicit demands for “place management” rather than program-focused management, and for a “bottom-up and joined-up” approach to solving multi-faceted problems (Howe and Cleary 2001);

- often injects an element of “market-based” solutions in its approach to neighbourhood regeneration;

- places greater emphasis on the community itself (rather than professionals or government) identifying its needs and defining desired outcomes – that is, on the community initiating action rather than being mobilised to act (Littlejohns and Thompson 2001).

Whatever the merits of the “old wine/new wine” argument, the reality is that community capacity building is now a central plank of public policy, and most would agree that this is a positive development.

## Some underlying values

The capacity building approach is an acknowledgement that certain groups and communities have been or are in danger of being “left behind” in our society and that they need to “catch up”. In making this acknowledgement, it implicitly endorses the value of equal opportunity and the desirability of greater social equity.

In its emphasis on participation and a more collaborative approach between different sectors, it not only reinforces the value of participatory democracy but expands the meaning of democratic governance at all levels (Howe and Cleary 2001). In effect, it overtakes the concept of "government as steerer, not rower" that dominated public policy in the early to mid-1990s, and asserts that the steering role should be shared – although the precise dimension of the sharing and of the residual control that should remain with government is often contested territory (see below).



**There are not always local solutions to local problems, regardless of the strength of a community's "capacity".**

The concept of *capacity building* (as opposed to "development") is also predicated on the conviction that all communities – whether geographic communities or communities of interest – have strengths or "assets". This apparently simple and self-evident understanding counterbalances the "deficit" prism through which disadvantaged people and communities are usually viewed.

The assets approach challenges the paternalism inherent in many public policies and programs and in the ways that "professionals" often work with communities. It also recognises that "interventions which take into account and build upon existing community capacities are more likely to be successful in accomplishing desired change than those which are adopted in a more traditional top-down manner" (Littlejohns and Thompson 2001: 37).

Connected to this is the proposition that solutions to problems are best developed and implemented by those closest to the problem – a belief succinctly expressed in the phrase "local solutions to local problems" (the name of a sub-program of the Commonwealth Government's Stronger Families and Communities Strategy). Viewed from this perspective, community capacity building is the latest manifestation of decentralisation in public policy.

Finally, while the main purpose of efforts to build a community's capacities is often to achieve a specific outcome (such as improving its ability to intervene early to

prevent child abuse and neglect, youth homelessness, substance abuse, etc.), many practitioners and analysts argue that it is also a desirable end in itself because it contributes to the creation and maintenance of active citizenship and social trust.

**Some underlying tensions**

As indicated by the preceding discussion, community capacity building can therefore be conceived as both a process and an outcome; as both a method of working and a value in and of itself. Given the complexities of the concept, it is not surprising that it contains some internal tensions and ambiguities. These do not negate its importance or usefulness but they do require open acknowledgement and careful handling by practitioners.

Some of these tensions and ambiguities include:

- There are not always local solutions to local problems, regardless of the strength of a community's "capacity". Some problems require state or national level changes in policies, political approaches and/or resource allocations.
- The "community" is not a single or homogenous entity. Within any community there will be different viewpoints and interests. These will not always "jigsaw" neatly and, in fact, will often conflict.
- Any community consensus that does exist on any issue may not gel with the objective evidence base.
- There can be significant disjunctures between the goals and desired outcomes set by governments and those preferred by local community organisations. This poses difficult questions such as: who best reflects "the community's wishes" (government bodies or local organisations), and should there always be shared decision-making and a search for consensus or should one party have the ultimate power and final say.
- Organic community leaders are not necessarily fully representative of the community or democratically appointed, but it is only motivated and willing individuals who move things forward and make change happen.

**Success factors in community building**

Work undertaken by Howe and Cleary (2001) for the Victorian Government on community building strategies included a substantial literature review from which they distilled "international best practice". While cautioning that local solutions must

be developed, they also felt confident that five key success factors could be identified from effective initiatives occurring in very different sets of circumstances.

These five key success factors (Howe and Cleary 2001: 3-4) are:

*"Capacity Building*, focusing on education and the development of human and social capital and increased connectedness.

*A Linked Approach*, involving co-ordination across government portfolios, partnerships between spheres of government (local, state and commonwealth), and partnerships between government, business, community and philanthropic sectors.

An emphasis on *Local Democracy*, whereby bottom-up initiatives take priority over solutions imposed from outside, and the importance of local identity, leadership, knowledge and management are recognised as critical components.

*Flexible Approaches*, that take regard of the multifaceted nature of the problems that face particular communities and which emphasise the importance of continuous reflection and development.

An emphasis on *Sustainable Strategies* rather than one-off projects, and (strategies) which recognise the ongoing inter-dependency of social, economic and environmental connectedness."

The research also indicates that: "These success factors tend to be mutually reinforcing and suggest that the process of community building is as important as the outcomes."

**References**

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