

This section of the Bulletin is focused on reflection. In projects reflection can take many forms – from informal chats to journal entries to focus groups and questionnaires. It can also focus on a wide variety of topics. And the reflections arising from the National Workshop for Stronger Families Fund projects “reflect” this diversity. Reflections include: the influence of location on project work; comments from workshop participants; personal responses to the workshop and to Melbourne; personal reflections on project work; and perceived outcomes from the workshop.

The influence of location on community projects

Anne Garrow

The Stronger Families Fund has a unique vision for Australian communities – to strengthen families through early intervention by communities that are supported to develop, implement and evaluate local solutions. These communities are located across Australia – from the large cities on the coast to the small Indigenous communities of the centre; from the rural hinterland to the western goldfields; from townships and arid farming areas to regional centres; from communities on the edge of growing cities to inner urban areas; from the northern tropics to the Tasmanian temperate zone; and from the east coast to the big tide country of the west.

All participating projects are located in areas confronting social and economic issues that impact on individuals, families and communities. While there are great variations in the project settings it is possible to loosely classify them as remote, rural/regional, urban fringe and urban.

This article is the result of a consultation with some projects about the similarities and differences in these different geographical communities and settings, and the impact of these

on the development and implementation of projects.

The information was gathered in consultation with the Stronger Families Learning Exchange (SFLEX) team and at the Stronger Families Fund National Workshop. Those contributing at the workshop included project workers, community members, Australian government Department of Family and Community Service (FaCS) workers, and SFLEX workers.

A session was held where participants described their area and answered the questions: “What are the strengths of being located in our area?” “What are the issues in being located in our area?”

The projects

There are currently 46 Stronger Families Fund projects, and Figure 1 shows the breakdown using the geographical descriptors of remote, rural/regional, urban fringe and urban.

There are some issues in using these four categories. Meaning may be constructed and experienced differently depending on where you live. For example, “remote” is a relational attribute referring to being distant from populated areas. While people who are not familiar with this country will describe it as “the middle of nowhere” and “nothing for miles”, this is not the experience for people who live there. For them the landscape is filled with meaning and his-

tory, and the location is immediate. Another issue is that in some instances it can be difficult to decide whether an area is rural or urban fringe. People in regional centres and towns located themselves as rural, but there are clear differences between a regional centre and a small country town or hamlet or farming area, and it may have been more useful to separate rural areas and regional centres.

Remote areas

All the projects located in remote areas were in Indigenous communities. Therefore the ways of working, and the strengths and issues described here are particularly applicable and relevant to working in Indigenous communities.

Our work with the projects and the consultation revealed that communities are made up of different family groups, and that it is important to build an understanding of who these groups are and how they are active in the community. Appropriate consultation with community members is vital and this means involving the family groups, not just the community organisations. It is important to be aware of power relationships in both consultation and in project participation.

Building good relationships is essential, and involvement (both personal and project) should be ongoing. Outsiders need to be flexible and responsive to what is happening in the community. They should be helpers working alongside community mem-

Table 1 Geographic location of projects

Remote	7
Rural and Regional centres	12
Urban Fringe	9
Urban	19



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bers rather than coordinators directing what should be done. Part of the role in working alongside community people is to assist them to become trained so they can be self sufficient in running their projects. Building this capacity and sustainability should take priority over expanding projects. Change takes time and funding guidelines need to acknowledge this.

Getting people to know about the project is easier in these communities because of their size and family relationships. Communication is by word of mouth and observation. It is important to engage in a back and forth dialogue with people to allow time for them to consider ideas and build a relationship where ideas can be shared. When community members are behind a project, they are responsive to the development of partnerships and to facilitating participation.

An outsider can bring in ideas but it is important to discuss and translate them into the local context. This is not just about translation into the local language, but also involves sharing ideas to see whether they make sense and have meaning in another culture and then making changes so that they are relevant. In doing documentation and submission writing

it is important to work with the community so they can have their own voice, with the project worker's role of the project being to translate the local voice for bureaucracy and visa versa.

It was noted that outsiders need to be mindful that while there are similarities between Indigenous communities there are also variations, and it cannot be assumed that what is culturally appropriate in one part of the country will be apply elsewhere.

Strengths

- People in the community know each other. If they are behind a project they are responsive to participating in it.
- In smaller close knit communities it is easier to communicate about a project and its activities. Communication will mainly be by word of mouth – people telling each other about things happening in their community.
- Developing partnerships with other community groups or organisations is generally quite possible.
- Governments are often responsive to funding needs.

Issues

- Outsiders need to develop understanding of how to work cross

culturally. One element is the need to examine whether their understanding and action is constructed from their own (mainstream) cultural assumptions.

- It is hard for outsiders to know local issues. This is a challenge faced by SFLEX workers who do not spend a lot of time in the community.
- There are problems in finding and keeping staff.
- There is a lack of skills and the means of acquiring them easily.
- Time and money are involved in working across large distances.
- There is a lack of infrastructure such as computers, telephones, internet access.
- There are geographical threats such as fires and floods.
- The impact of funding is strongly felt and can in some instances lead to envy from other people or organisations in the community.

Rural/Regional areas

Projects in the rural/regional category are located in a variety of rural settings, from large rural areas that include a number of small and large townships, to specific rural towns and regional centres. Project communities include Indigenous, mining, farming and rural township populations. Some projects

Daly River,
Northern
Territory



only work with one of these communities, others with several. The population ranges from highly transient to very stable and close knit depending on where the project is located.

Employment in these areas tends to be related to mining and agriculture. To work effectively in these projects it is important to have some understanding of these different economies and working environments and how they impact on individuals and family and community life.

The project work can involve a lot of driving and the need to get to know and work with a number of different communities. Each is distinct and needs support in identifying their local issues and solutions and project workers need to be prepared to be regular visitors.

It is also important that the project auspice body has an understanding of the area. Geographically distant auspice bodies may be operating in an unfamiliar environment and with administration made more difficult because of the distance.

People in rural/regional communities can be suspicious of government funding, particularly if they view it as short term or a pilot project. For this reason they may be unwilling to get involved.

Informal links between people and the strength of existing groups facilitates communication about the project and the development of partnerships. However, these communities can also stigmatise outsiders and difference and there are challenges for workers to include small diverse groups. Distances and diverse communities pose challenges to developing responses that are inclusive.

Strengths

- Communities are tightly knit. There are often strong school communities.
- Partnerships can be easier to develop between existing community groups because people already know each other informally.
- Existing community groups are often strong.
- Projects provide work and volunteers.

Issues

- Projects are often responsible for large areas that include a lot of regional diversity.
- The auspice body is often geographically distant creating problems with understanding of project issues and with the day to day administration of the project.
- Because of the smaller population diversity can occur on a small scale. There is a need to be inclusive of and responsive to small scale diversity.
- People tend to be suspicious of government funding, particularly of short term or pilot projects.
- Issues in these areas can include racism, sexism and "idle youth".

Urban Fringe

Projects that identify themselves as urban fringe are generally located in areas that are either near to or on the edge of large cities. In most instances the growth of the cities' suburbs has changed the nature of the location from being a distinct community on the edge of the city to now being more connected. However, these urban fringe communities still maintain their identity.

These communities are a mixture of old and new, of people with a strong community identity and others who lack a sense of connection. These

areas provide affordable housing for people on low incomes. The population is often culturally diverse and includes Indigenous people, new arrivals and a fragmented working class who may have lived in the area for generations. In some cases there is a socio-economic mix with a wealthier group moving in to traditionally poorer areas because of the area's natural assets, for example a seaside location. There can be divisions between these different groups of residents.

Unemployment is high and there may be multigenerational disadvantage issues. These areas often get bad press about social and environmental issues. Projects have found it is important to map community assets and project a positive community self image in order to work effectively. Funding provides the opportunity to top up community resources and to build their capacity.

Because of the high levels of need interventions are often developed around identifiable communities of interest (for example, young mothers, the Indigenous community, a particular neighbourhood). There can remain a high level of conflicting need which is compounded in instances when the city has not changed its service delivery boundaries and to the new demographic landscape. Local communities therefore have to meet their local population's needs.

Being distant from the city centre brings mixed blessings. On one hand there can be a strong commitment to innovative projects and on the other hand people are jaded by too many pilot projects and needs assessments with a lack of follow up. This has implications for project development, communication and participation. Lack of confidence in

R E F L E C T I O N

Working in a cross-cultural context

The Stronger Families Fund National Workshop included a session entitled *Working across communities*. The setting for this role-play/scenario was a large high rise public housing estate in inner city Melbourne, where a high proportion of households are on low incomes, and many families are from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds.

The scenario was based on a public meeting, where people from diverse backgrounds and interests were brought together to try to reach consensus about an issue – the development of some open parkland within the estate.

Project participants were allocated to one of a number of roles, representing the diverse mix of people present at the staged public meeting. The role-play was taken on with great enthusiasm and there were a number of star performances!

The process was especially useful, as it forced participants to be in someone else's shoes and to see a situation from a perspective other than their own. It highlighted the challenges of working across communities, the need for mutual respect and understanding, and the critical role of project workers in mediating between community groups to achieve mutually acceptable outcomes.

projects as solutions can be compounded by a high turnover of workers who often do not reside in the area.

Strengths

- A sense of identity and belonging. In some ways these areas are similar to a country town with local papers and a local history and identity.
- Diversity between suburbs and cultures and communities within communities
- Commitment of residents and workers to the area and history.
- Rapid growth of these areas can lead to a motivation of residents to be involved and a willingness to work together and to be volunteers.
- Distance from the city centre can create innovative responses. People draw on their own resources.
- Relative proximity to urban centres facilitates access to services.
- Opportunity emerges from targeting by government. (The media focus can be positive as the attention to local issues can help bring in resources.)
- Location can be picturesque.

Issues

- In some places with a transient population there can be a lack of a sense of community. There can also be poor community self esteem.
- There can be divisions between different groups of residents (for example people living in public and private housing, new and old residents) and between different geographical communities.
- Rapid change impacts on people. In areas with rapid growth the growth can outstrip service capacity. Gaps and overlaps can develop as can territorial issues.
- People can suffer from isolation due to lack of public and private transport, distances, cost of travel.
- There is often a poor infrastructure, including business structure and difficulty in accessing financial resources.
- Lack of appropriate community spaces and a lack of recreation and study options for young people.
- Limited political power to lobby.
- Indigenous people in the area may or may not have a direct relationship to that country.

- Many pilot projects are initiated and needs assessments conducted without follow up.
- Transient and professionalised project workers.

Urban areas

Projects in urban areas need to consider communities in terms of communities of interest rather than geographical communities. Urban area projects are located in diverse, populated areas that are not as cohesive as remote and rural/regional or even urban fringe areas. Many of the urban projects are located on public housing estates and in some instances parents using the project have been older than expected.

As with urban fringe areas, there are distinct communities of interest and because of the high level of need there are often a number of other organisations and a capacity to network organisationally within these communities of interest.

However, taking this approach can lead to a tendency to label the areas of interest as problems and can result in a number of paid, professionalised workers involved without increasing participation of community members.

Urban project workers need to consider ways to connect with the communities of interest. As with other areas participation is generally facilitated by people telling each other about a project and being invited to be part of it. But there can be conflicting interests and access to other facilities and ease of mobility between neighbourhoods create difficulties in gaining participation.

Strengths

- A large population and a diverse community.
- Access to public transport.
- Access to facilities.
- Good resources (usually).
- A more diverse socio-economic group is likely to use projects.
- Easier for FaCS workers to work with organisations and communities.
- Great volunteers.
- Good teams of people to work with.
- Strong networks and the capacity to network.
- Uniqueness.

Issues

- Communities are not strong when compared with rural or remote areas.
- It is harder to develop participation.
- It can be hard to communicate with the communities of interest.
- Workers take a problem oriented approach to issues.
- Project participants tend to be labelled as “low income”.
- Domestic violence, substance abuse, child protection issues and increasing unemployment.

Conclusion

Overall, we found that there are differences in the settings that influence the way in which communities think about themselves and act and the way in which projects develop.

We also found that the fundamental elements of good community work and the principles of action research hold for every setting. These include:

- Developing an understanding of the community including its geography, its history, different interest groups, ways people communicate and the issues experienced by community members.
- Developing understanding about relationships between people and organisations and what facilitates and what acts as barriers in these relationships.
- Working alongside people.
- Being inclusive of stigmatised groups.
- Communicating directly and encouraging participation through networks and relationships.
- Giving consideration to how issues can be strengths.
- Ensuring local voices and local concerns are communicated with others, including bureaucracy.

Good community and family project development work is an art that is based on these elements. It operates on the broad canvas of the community context and works alongside the community to draw local responses and develop and implement unique local solutions.

Anne Garrow is a Senior Research Officer with the Stronger Families Learning Exchange at the Australian Institute of Family Studies.

