

Learnings from the *Shared Action Project*

How to build sustainability into community projects

When we mention the term “sustainability in communities”, what come up as being the important elements are the development of trust and reciprocity *among* people and *between* people, and the recognition that skills are held within the community.

The Shared Action Project was a community capacity building project located in a suburb of Bendigo (called Long Gully) in Victoria. Funded by the Potter Foundation Trust, the project started in 1996 and ran for three years originally. The Australian Department of Family and Community Services (FaCS) through their Strengthening Family’s initiative then funded the project for another two years, with the project finishing at the end of 2002.

The Shared Action Project’s primary aim was to increase child safety by strengthening the capacity of the local community and by supporting projects identified and implemented

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by the local community to achieve their vision of a healthy, safe and pleasant community.

Towards the end of the project, the project community reference group and families living in the community identified the need to continue to resource community members to develop their community leadership skills in a variety of ways. The need for development of trust and tolerance towards each other and in the community has continued to be a priority for people in a range of areas such as developing youth activities and support

for young people to develop skills and opportunities in their community.

We now have further funding from FaCS for what is called a Promoting Harmony project, operating out of both Long Gully and an adjoining public housing area in Eaglehawk. The aim of activities within the project is to further develop tolerance and trust between and with people in their communities.

Some of the activities included are Theatre of Transformation – real life stories created by young people who are performing an interactive theatre piece to their peers, parents and community members. There are positive



interventions throughout the performance where the audience participates to find alternative positive endings and choices to the life stories being acted out by the young people.

It is significant that people in this low socio-economic and resource deprived area identified trusting relationships as the underlying element needed to promote other aspects of wellbeing. Communication, relationships, belong-

ing and identity were and still remain the underlying key priorities identified by community members.

Community members expected that the development of strong relationships would occur as a result of providing opportunities for people to meet, interact and participate in activities for the good of the community. Therefore, the original strategies chosen were to establish forums for interaction that

would act as an ongoing social infrastructure in the community.

Important principles are that the community does have the inherent strength and capacity to achieve its goals and aspirations, given appropriate support and opportunities to develop partnerships with key local government agencies and other projects in the wider Bendigo area. While recognising that community often



needs access to resources outside of the local community, it builds upon the fact that there are vast skills and resources available within the community. These skills and potential are often an untapped resource or just need to be acknowledged and nurtured to aid in the quest for creating a healthy and safe community.

Our involvement with the community is governed by several guiding principles:

- The focus is on activity that builds upon inherent strengths and positive pictures of the future rather than maintaining a focus on what is “wrong” or “inadequate”.
- The goals of respect and safety are reflected in the relationships established between workers and community members.
- Community members are supported and join in celebrating, reflecting upon achievements and the evaluation of the progress of projects.
- Resources are directed towards guiding and modelling with community members as enablers for them to take on leadership roles.
- Action reflects the priorities of community members not workers – things need to be culturally relevant

to people in the community (informal meetings, getting to know workers at the same level, for example, working alongside someone in the community garden project).

- Community members are well informed and consulted about what and how to do things at all stages.

Key factors deemed important in building the capacity within a community are the development of Community Business Enterprises which are examples of the development of various levels of community participation and ownership. This participation includes the connections community people have made with other agencies and local government. How we have gone about doing this highlights some important lessons.

These Community Enterprises are the materialisation of the energy and strength latent in the community and demonstrate a powerful form of community development from within. Two examples are shown in the box accompanying this article.

Example 1. From dancing to . . .

A group of young girls in the community were informally dancing to modern music in their homes and needed a support and a venue to continue their activities. The girls met

with a group of mothers and the project worker to discuss how we could support their group. What resulted was the realisation that there were three women who had the expertise and skills in various dance forms living in the local community, who were willing to help organise and run a Come & Try day in modern jazz/ballet, ballroom dancing and boot scooting.

More than 50 children and parents attended the Come & Try session, and eight weeks of dance classes followed in the three dance forms. There was sufficient interest in modern jazz/ballet for a new dance company to emerge. The result was a dance school with more than 70 girls from the ages of four to 14 years registered as dancers.

The group put on their own community dance concert and attracted a large crowd of over 100 people. It gave the mothers a chance to work together – learning how to make and sew dance costumes and organise a fund raising event – and the opportunity form friendships with each other, and build networks.

Schoolteachers have noticed that the academic performance in children who are now dancing improve remarkably. The dance group outgrew the local community centre and



have now formed a positive partnership with one of the local primary schools, and use their school hall for dance practice three nights a week.

Example 2. Art as communication

Shared Action project successfully gained an Artist in Schools funded project for a mosaic artistic to work with two local primary schools to use art to create connections between children, the school and parents in the community. With the assistance of the artist, students built art installations at both the schools. Further art work-

shops were run at the Long Gully Community House for local parents, children and young people.

People created large mosaic pavers that had designs on them, that for the creator were pictures of a vision of a happy and healthy community. The pavers were installed into the local family park (New Chum Reserve), which students from three local secondary colleges helped to build through a work experience/trade skills course. The park building project was a collaborative partnership between Shared Action, St Luke's, Long Gully Community House, local secondary schools, Local Government, an employment and training agency and local community leaders.

When the design for the family park was being created the architect employed by Local Government to do the design consulted with local secondary college students about what they would like to see built in the park. What resulted was the building of a large five-metre "teenage talking circle", with a concrete base and eight large stones set around the perimeter of the circle.

We were approached by Anne Conway, a primary and secondary school

Koori Education worker, who put us in touch with a local Koori artist Eileen Bellangarie, who suggested an Aboriginal design motif for the talking circle that would encompass youth art and reconciliation. It was decided a mosaic-tiled style would be suitable for the design.

Community members indicated that they wished for the opportunity to participate in constructing the circle. Various groups such as the Dja Dja Wrung Aboriginal Cooperative, the Education Department Koori homework centre, Local Government, local schools, various community groups, and government agencies were contacted and invited to participate. Portions of the design were divided and distributed amongst various working groups. Hence over 20 different groups and hundreds of children and adults contributed to the overall installation.

On completion of the circle a community celebration was organised with local Aboriginal elders welcoming people onto Dja Dja Wrung land, and it was acknowledged that the project had been a way for the community to work together in reconciliation.

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