

Working with *Indigenous communities*

In Australia a number of State and Commonwealth programs are attempting to use bottom-up and capacity-building approaches to strengthening disadvantaged communities. This reflects recognition that effective initiatives need a strong element of community engagement and participation for sustainable solutions.



In my experience, three features stand out in strong communities:

- First, a strong community is one that is able to respond effectively to crises, embrace change, and resolve issues. That is, it has the capacity to mobilise the resources and skills needed to deal with the problems it encounters.
- Second, a strong community has a shared sense of belonging or solidarity, and a common set of values and norms of behaviour that facilitate cooperation and problem-solving, while enabling it to embrace diversity.
- Third, it is sustainable over generations. That is, it's worked out ways of preserving, regenerating, adapting or creating the resources, skills and values needed to continue to exist

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for the benefit of its current and future generations. This includes being environmentally and culturally sustainable.

In this article, the term "communities" generally refers to geographic population centres. However, whether they be geographic locations or communities of interest, communities fall somewhere along the continuum of weak to strong, with different levels of motivation, assets, skills and other resources.

Previous Bulletin articles have explained the concept of capacity-building and the principles behind development programs such as the Australian Government Department of

Family and Community Services (FaCS) Stronger Families and Communities Strategy. Building capacity essentially means developing skills, knowledge and resources, but it is not just a matter of training or funding buildings or professional services. It is also about using development processes that allow or enable people to define and work towards their own objectives, to manage their own initiatives, and to be effective advocates and mobilisers of social change and economic development.

Every community is different, and there is no set formula for capacity-building, but it is possible to distil a common set of principles to guide development facilitators. Such principles include:



- start from local conditions and existing plans, and build on community strengths and assets;
- design processes to maximise local participation, implementation, control and sustainability (use capacity-building and action learning processes);
- value cultural strengths and work with cultural practices and preferences;
- be responsive to community needs, priorities, capacities and timeframes;
- integrate new initiatives with existing programs and services;
- forge real partnerships that feature shared responsibilities, power and mutual benefits;
- ensure skills transfer strategies to local people are built in where external experts are employed;

- provide flexible funding arrangements that allow adjustments to expenditure and activities in response to learnings and changes in local circumstances (this can include developing multi-agency contracts, so that the organisation only has one set of reporting requirements instead of four or five if carrying out an initiative funded from several sources); and
- assess weaknesses and risks and provide support commensurate with those risks.

While these principles are applicable in any setting, the circumstances of Indigenous Australians require additional considerations. The range and degree of socio-economic disadvantages are broader and deeper than for non-indigenous communities, which mean that Indigenous people can

experience greater difficulties in acting collectively, organising effectively and managing local initiatives.

In remote communities overcrowded households are all too common, and many lack basic amenities such as functional toilets, stoves, washing machines and fridges. Inability to manage low incomes due to low financial literacy, lack of banking services, and cultural demands to share resources, contributes to impaired family functioning. Development workers need to understand how poor living conditions, poor health, poor education, lack of meaningful work, loss of traditional roles, and the impact of western culture imposes limitations on the ability of residents to engage in development activities.

Nevertheless, every community usually has a core of knowledgeable and

dedicated local people involved in a range of community activities. Care must be taken not to overload them and to gain the involvement of others with capacity to contribute.

Another factor affecting government agencies trying to assist Indigenous communities is that Indigenous peoples' relationship with government over the years and their experience of government-imposed "development" has been highly problematic. Given their history of colonisation, dispossession and dispersal, population decimation through introduced diseases, child-removal, cultural loss and discrimination, Indigenous peoples have good reason to distrust governments. Building trust through personal relationships, being honest and keeping promises is essential for any worker engaged in community

development work, especially if a government employee.

In addition, this history and its legacy of much shorter life expectancies, higher infant death rates, higher rates of suicide and other fatalities, and higher rates of family disintegration than for non-indigenous Australians means that Indigenous communities are characterised by an almost continual state of grief and sadness.

Applying capacity building in remote communities

Besides the conditions described above, a number of other difficulties can affect the application of capacity building and participatory development principles in a remote community. Some of these challenges are described below.

Don't assume that Indigenous communities are geographically bounded and socially cohesive, with democratically elected leadership legitimately representing "the community"

Not all Indigenous settlements are situated on the population's traditional lands, having been created by governments or missionaries. The question of who is a member of a community and entitled to participate in local affairs can be problematic, especially in communities with fuzzy geographical boundaries and/or highly mobile, seasonal or itinerant populations.

In Indigenous communities, non-indigenous residents may not be regarded as legitimate members of the community. Where several clan groups have been forced to co-locate, the traditional owners may not regard



the others as legitimate community members, or they may all regard themselves as separate communities of interest. There are also town camps on the fringes of urban centres that have permanent residents as well as significant numbers of frequent visitors. This mix means that factions and tensions can exist that make cooperation and agreement on development plans or management of community initiatives problematic.

Don't assume one model of democratic decision making

Community development processes usually assume democratic practices. This can be particularly problematic in cultures where western democratic practices are not a traditional form of decision-making. The assumption is that elected people will represent their particular constituency (clan

group, geographical area or interest group). However, those elected may not have the traditional authority to represent anyone, while those holding traditional authority may not be listened to by external powers because they have not been elected.

In some Indigenous communities, people, particularly women, are more comfortable with non-adversarial systems of decision-making, ways that emphasise discussion rather than debate, and consensus rather than majority votes. Development workers need to ensure there is agreement on local decision-making protocols for new initiatives.

Select appropriate planning processes

In Australia, Indigenous communities have often been required in the past to use planning models developed and imposed by bureaucracies. However,

there are now many experienced community facilitators who have built up a range of techniques to assist communities and organisations in planning processes that suit their needs, capacities and preferences. Those working in Indigenous communities often employ local people to work alongside them to help design locally-tailored processes and facilitate community participation.

Build on what already exists

Local people may not have the skills or desire to produce a written plan able to satisfy both community needs and government needs. For cultures that have strong oral communication traditions, writing plans can be a foreign experience. In communities where the levels of literacy and numeracy in the country's dominant language are comparatively low,

producing a written plan that can be understood by the community as well as be sophisticated enough to satisfy the accountability requirements of funding bodies may be too difficult. Development facilitators need to be a bridge or translator between the people and government, and creative about how to present local ideas and plans depending on the audience.

Most communities have already undergone some kind of planning or needs analysis process, though not necessarily in a participative and comprehensive way. In every community, there are usually a number of local actions already being undertaken by various groups and organisations for various beneficial purposes, and a number of desired actions already being developed or on the wish list.

Development facilitators should use and build on what already exists, although checking current relevance and ensuring the approval of stakeholders may be required.

Participation in planning processes

Community development approaches usually emphasise the importance of widespread participation in community planning, both as a means of building a shared vision and commitment to working together, and to ensure that priority issues are identified and proposed strategies are viable. However, in widely dispersed communities, regardless of who initiates or drives the process, the larger the population the more difficult it is to ensure all have an opportunity to participate. Ensuring all views are fairly considered and reconciling the views of different factions and

interest groups is an ongoing challenge for any community.

The larger the population the more difficult it is to ensure all have an opportunity to participate. Also, the harder it is to ensure all views are fairly considered and the harder to reconcile different factions/interest groups. It is also highly unlikely that all members of a community will want to be involved in group planning processes, or have the time to be involved, or accord it a high enough level of priority in relation to other daily priorities.

Workers guiding a planning process need to be aware of the various factions, interests and tensions, who the powerbrokers are, and the correct protocols for gaining approval. They should also provide a variety of ways in which people can choose to



participate, should they be so inclined. Making sure that the views of all interested parties are heard is also important – young people in particular are often left out of planning processes and may require creative strategies to engage.

Don't assume that everyone will want to participate, or have the capacity to participate

The extent and depth of the pressures and problems faced by some Indigenous families can put additional demands on local leaders that are generally not experienced by local leaders in mainstream communities – they are often dealing with their serious family problems in addition to fulfilling community responsibilities. Pressures to fulfill family obligations can also conflict with the disinterested administrative culture we take for granted as essential for good governance. Participation of residents in local activities is often limited by the need to deal with complex personal circumstances.

Language barriers and cultural differences pose difficulties for any process of meaningful engagement between government and local people, and place an additional moral duty of care on government agencies to ensure understanding of all concerned. Where English is not well understood this may mean engaging local interpreters or facilitators with expertise in cross-cultural communication.

Don't assume local ability to generate and implement effective solutions

Although local people often have the best information about local needs and issues, in some cases they may be limited in understanding causes and generating viable solutions, especially if there is low educational achievement and restricted exposure to other ideas and experiences. There is also a risk of simplistic solutions being proposed by a majority or powerful elites without due regard for minority interests and impacts, or for solutions to conflict with norms and values held by the wider population (for example, some aspects of customary law may clash with human rights principles, or due

process principles, or state or national laws). Also some problems impacting at the local level may only be properly addressed at a regional, state, national or international level. However, local people are best placed to work out how to implement an agreed strategy in practical terms and how to navigate competing interests.

Development facilitators can assist by introducing new ideas for discussion, providing information on strategies that have worked elsewhere, introducing others who can provide expert advice, and being a “critical friend” to ensure legal, financial, management, health and safety and other aspects are properly considered. In planning for future needs communities may also need assistance gathering data such as population profile and projections and various socio-economic data and trends.

In many cases an Indigenous community group needs to employ skilled outsiders to assist them. If they are not experienced employers, or do not have the capacity to manage employees well, they risk over-reliance on the worker which can lead to them being in control in name only. Building recruitment and supervision capacity, ensuring there are mechanisms for identifying such problems and maintaining close contact should be part of any new initiative where this is a risk.

Share knowledge about government

Effective community or regional planning processes and development of project ideas or new service designs can take a long time. If a proposal requires asking for government funding, it can be difficult for communities, especially isolated ones, to find out what suitable programs are available. They may then have to wait until a program's next funding round occurs before submitting an application. Even if approved in principle, they may then enter into a long period of negotiation before a funding agreement is signed and funds released. All these delays can stifle or dissipate community momentum and motivation.

While most government program managers are aware of this and try to be responsive, it is probably best to

prepare community project proposers for a long wait and build into plans some contingency activities that can keep local interest alive. It is also wise to have alternative plans in case funding is not approved or is less than requested.

Be flexible about time

In Indigenous communities, timeframes and progress are often affected by other imperatives such as funerals and ceremonies, or personal crises affecting people's ability to focus on the business at hand. Government officers wishing to meet with local people need to understand that agreed meeting times will not always be adhered to, and that decisions are rarely made on the spot. Having a relaxed attitude about this, ensuring plenty of time is allowed for community visits, not expecting instant responses and being prepared to change plans can help ensure relationships are maintained and progress continues.

Be aware of different values, cultural dissonance and cultural practices

Community development language, processes and values have implicit cultural biases, which may not fit well with traditional or preferred Indigenous ways of resolving issues. Development workers need to stay aware of their own assumptions and be open to understanding other world views.

In some remote Indigenous communities it has only been a matter of decades since first contact with non-Indigenous Australians. Traditional practices can still be very strong, and effective workers understand cultural differences in child rearing practices, relationship to country, familial roles and responsibilities, spirituality, and communication styles. Also, some remote peoples practise avoidance behaviours whereby certain relatives cannot talk to each other or certain clan groups cannot associate with others. There are some matters that are considered men's business and some which are women's business, and rules about the keeping and transmission of certain cultural knowledge. This impacts on how meetings are organised and the topics discussed and recorded.

Devolving authority and control

A crucial element of empowering communities is that decision-making and control over resources should be devolved to the local level. To achieve this a range of factors need to be addressed, such as:

- ensuring an appropriate governance authority with the legitimacy and authority to act on behalf of their constituency, whether this be at a local council level or at a community organisation level;
- ensuring those with administrative or management responsibilities have the capacity to carry out their duties well and in accordance with organisational and legal accountabilities; and
- streamlining the accountability burdens imposed by government agencies on funding recipients to reduce the time spent on satisfying government rather than community needs.

If governance capacity is inadequate, there may need to be effort put into building this before embarking on new initiatives. Alternatively, other supports can be built in according to the level and kind of risk involved.

Build for continuity and sustainability of interventions

Community planning and implementation processes, even without the difficulties already mentioned, can take several years. There are inevitably changes in process leaders (in communities and in government agencies) during this period which impact on momentum, direction and relationships. Sustainability strategies for new local initiatives must therefore be built into the development phase – this includes developing strategies to ensure continuity of effective leadership/management, staffing and volunteers (if applicable), as well as how to meet any ongoing funding needs.

Time-limited pilot projects in particular pose dilemmas – on the one hand they are useful and necessary methods of testing new ideas, which can lead to broader policy changes and new programs. However, they also affect the communities in which they are undertaken, and withdrawal at the

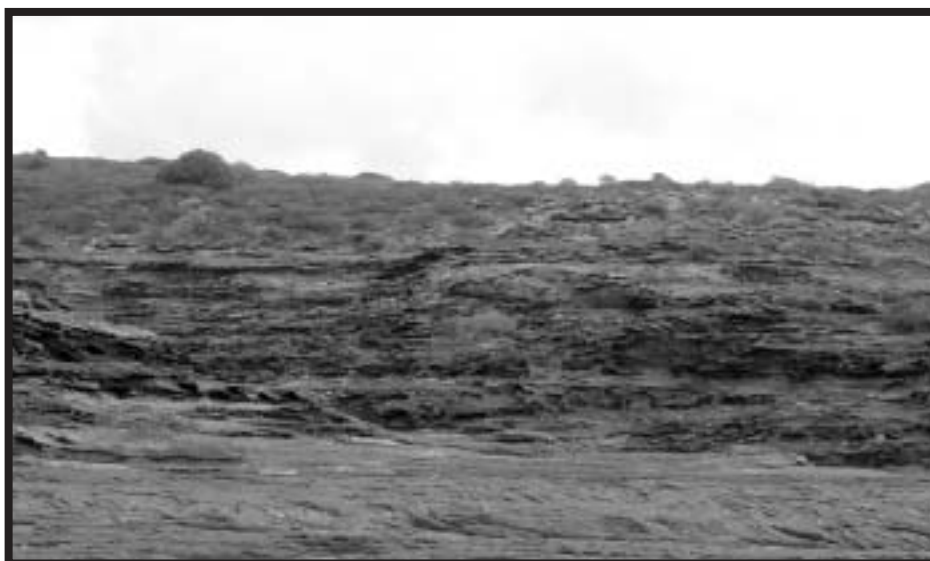
end of a pilot phase can undo any positive outcomes achieved. Pilots must always be entered into with community understanding that continuation is not guaranteed, and attention should be paid to an exit strategy that minimises any potential harm.

Conclusion

Working with Indigenous communities may be challenging, but it also offers great opportunities for personal growth and can be highly rewarding when actions start making a difference. The personal connections made

you've only got a tiny bottom, you won't necessarily come up with the best solutions on your own. An "inside-out" and "outside-in" dynamic is also needed, where contact with others helps spark new ideas, understandings and discussions, and gives access to learning from others' experiences. "Top-down" support is also needed from bureaucracies willing to work flexibly and responsively with communities.

Keeping the challenges and principles in mind offers a guide for ethical and effective assistance. The frame-



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in the process of working and learning together, the fun and laughter that comes with it, and even the sharing of sad stories and tears are well worth the effort. People and communities are much more than the sum of their problems. People have interests, passions, skills and abilities. All communities have physical and natural assets, equipment, local organisations and institutions on which to build. While looking at needs and deficits is important, it is even more critical to look at assets – what is already there that can be harnessed or linked to maximise the synergies and support local problem-solving and self-help action.

There is no single design for strengthening communities – the "bottom-up" approach sounds good, but if

work that social capital concepts give to this work are useful, as they focus on the *relationships, trust and networks* that underpin development of all the other types of capital necessary to building sustainable, safe and cohesive communities.

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