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# Mainstreaming Change: Learning from Community Strengthening in Victoria

**Sue West, John Wiseman and Santina Bertone**

This paper considers the lessons from community strengthening projects instigated under the Victorian State Governments Community Building Initiative and considers the implications of these lessons for future community strengthening policy and practice in Victoria.

The first section of the paper explores the rise of more 'community' focused policy and practice in Australia, the drivers behind this approach, and the tensions and issues along the way. This is followed by an outline of the specific policy context of community strengthening in Victoria and the approach by the Victorian State Government since 1999. The paper suggests that the policy direction in Victoria has moved from a projects based approach to looking at ways of 'mainstreaming' community strengthening.

The paper then considers the findings of a research project which sought to understand, from a practice perspective, what factors have contributed to successful community strengthening. It is suggested that a community centred approach to community strengthening is what works best.

The final section of the paper considers what these findings mean in the context of a search for more 'mainstreamed' approaches to community strengthening and a number of key strategies are identified. The paper concludes with some comments about the implications of the lessons from the 'experimenting' phase for alternative public policy ideas.

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## **Community strengthening**

The rise of community strengthening policy and practice in Australia is consistent with an international trend toward more community-focused solutions to complex social, economic and environmental problems. This focus has occurred in a time of growing dissatisfaction with the impacts of neo-liberal globalisation and provides opportunities to consider ways of developing a more socially just civil society and a more inclusive and democratic policy paradigm (Carson 2004; Geddes 2005; Weeks, Hoatson and Dixon 2003; Wiseman 2005).

Following an extensive review of Australian and international literature, Considine defined community strengthening as:

*Any sustained effort to increase the connectedness, active engagement and partnership among members of the community, community groups and organisations in order to enhance social, economic and environmental objectives. (Considine 2004a, p. 5)*

From this definition it is clear that the underlying objectives of community strengthening include social, economic and environmental outcomes and that the way to achieve these is to focus effort on creating stronger communities through enhancing connectedness, engagement and partnership between various stakeholders in the community. Considine (2004a) suggests that four core ingredients have emerged as central to helping communities become stronger:

- increased connectedness among key actors;
- new forms of distributed leadership;
- partnerships and joint ventures; and
- the development of new governance institutions.

He further suggests that community strengthening efforts in Australia have tended to include one or two of the ingredients but rarely all four (Considine, 2004a).

There are three interrelated drivers of support for community strengthening within governments in Australia.

Firstly, we have seen the development of an increasingly strong conceptual framework and evidence linking social connectedness, social capital and civil society to improvements

in economic productivity, social inclusion, public safety and public health (Adams and Hess 2001; Productivity Commission 2003; Smythe, Reddell and Jones 2005). Both in Australia and overseas, this has generally resulted in increased support for place-based initiatives with an emphasis on the inclusion of disadvantaged communities.

Secondly, there has been a growing interest in alternatives to centralised managerialist approaches to government. These include 'changing the way government works' and 'joined up' approaches, networked governance and increased emphasis on both partnership and local governance (Rhodes 1997; Considine 2003).

Thirdly, there has been a search for policy and practices that offer increased opportunities for community engagement and a general recognition that engaged processes are more likely to result in more relevant services and government responses. The term 'engagement' implies a required understanding of communities, their histories, particularities and how they work (Hashagen 2002).

The importance of community level activity, social connectedness and collective action are not new ideas. Community development theory and practice from the late 1960s onwards promoted the importance of people's participation in civic life and drew attention to the unequal access people have to this realm. There are many examples in Australia's past of public policy initiatives that have been underpinned by community development principles, for example, the Australian Assistance Plan (Coleman, 1973). With the rise of neo-liberalism, community development lost favour with governments in the late 1980s and into the 1990s but is finding increasing favour in the current environment. It is worth noting, however, that whilst various phases of government policy have impacted on the capacity of community development activity, many local communities continue to drive their own community development agenda.

The emerging community strengthening policy paradigm is not without tensions, contradictions and problems. Many of these arise because government led community strengthening policy and practice falls within the consensual model of working with communities (Hoatson 2003) which is characterised by:

- engagement between the state and community organisations, e.g. for funding purposes;
- partnerships based on consensus;
- general agreement between parties being reached prior to community activity proceeding; and
- practice following 'notional common phases of building, maintaining and mobilising communities' (Hoatson 2003, p. 25).

Hoatson (2003) suggests the issues arising from this approach include problematic power relations when communities are working with more powerful actors such as governments, and the fact that striving for middle ground solutions can mean that important community issues are played down.

*Another issue, as Carson (2004) so eloquently articulated at the 2004 VCOSS Congress, is that there are enormous tensions and challenges about how community is defined. Lynn (2004), alerts us to the idea that governments tend to reflect 'top down' relationships between communities. Lynn also notes, however, that 'bottom up' discourse (adopted by many involved in community strengthening projects) offers a 'reframing of community-state relationships in a way that firmly politicises communities into the public sphere, shifts the political balance and argues for a new form of participatory democracy' (Lynn 2004, p. 2).*

Although critical of much of the community discourse, Lynn (2004) concludes that 'We can work toward a socially just civil society'. Similarly, Carson (2004) acknowledges that 'neighbourhood does matter'. He suggests, however, that the way to achieve socially just and sustainable democratic participation is to simultaneously maintain a focus on change 'upstream', at the level of macro economic and other policy (Carson 2004). This view recognises the inherent danger of 'blaming' neighbourhoods for their 'disadvantage' rather than understanding the broader impacts of economic policy and, indeed, globalisation (Carson 2004; Mowbray 2004).

Clearly, the ideas and values behind community strengthening differ from the neo-liberalist values of market supremacy, competition, contracting, individual consumers and centralised government (Wiseman 2005; Reddel 2005). Instead there is a growing focus on developing increased connectedness among key players; new forms of distributed leadership; partnerships and joint ventures; and new governance institutions (Considine 2004b). Whilst being mindful of the tensions and contradictions of this emerging frame, the current policy environment provides fertile ground for refocusing on policy and practice leading to a more socially just civil society.

## **The approach by the Victorian State Government**

Since 1999, the Bracks Labor Government's approach to community strengthening has evolved from experimental piloting to a more coherent strategy employing community strengthening as a way of exploring more engaged, 'joined up' and networked approaches to governance and policy making. This approach can usefully be described in terms of the following four overlapping phases:

### Phase 1: Resetting the goal posts (November 1999–October 2001)

The Bracks Government's first step in resetting the Victorian policy goal posts was a summit, which was followed by the launch of a triple bottom line policy framework *Growing Victoria Together* (GVT – Victorian Government 2000). This was the first step in creating a platform for the re-emergence of community strengthening strategies in Victoria.

### Phase 2: Piloting and experimenting (October 2001–December 2003)

A significant action, supportive of community strengthening following the release of the GVT policy framework was the launch of the Community Building Initiative (CBI) in October 2001. It included four flagship initiatives for re-exploring community strengthening ideas and practice:

- An enhanced role for the Community Support Fund (CSF) as a more strategic mechanism for funding community strengthening initiatives;
- Eleven Community Building Demonstration Projects as a basis for testing and learning about the development and implementation of effective community building programs;
- Continued support for the Community Capacity Building Initiative established by the Department of Industry and Regional Development to strengthen small rural communities; and
- Continued support for the Neighbourhood Renewal Program established by the Office of Housing to improve social and economic outcomes in Victoria's most disadvantaged areas.

A range of contributing programs being implemented across the government was also identified in the CBI (DVC 2001).

### Phase 3: Establishment of the Department of Victorian Communities (December 2003–May 2005)

Following the re-election of the Bracks Government in 2003, the Department of Victorian Communities (DVC) was established to provide an institutional mechanism for achieving the GVT objective of building cohesive communities through a more integrated approach to planning, funding and delivering services at the local level (DVC 2005a). DVC provides support to, and helps integrate, the portfolios of ten ministers and incorporates a Division of Community Strengthening and Volunteering that, amongst other things, oversaw the implementation of the demonstration projects.

The DVC's work has been informed by the following understanding of community strengthening, as expressed by the Minister for Victorian Communities, John Thwaites:

*Community strengthening lies at the heart of our approach to Government in Victoria. We want to harness the energy of communities so that they can shape their own futures. Government must also change the way it works to better understand and respond to the needs and aspirations of Victorian communities.*

*We want to find new ways to tackle disadvantage, create opportunities, and deliver tangible benefits such as jobs, educational options, safer places to live and work, better services and a healthy, sustainable environment.*

*It's also important to have people with skills to put these plans into action.*

*We want to encourage partnerships at the local level between community organisations, business and government to really make a difference to the future of those communities. (DVC 2005b)*

### Phase 4: Mainstreaming and changing the way government works (from May 2005)

*Growing Victoria Together II* was launched in April 2005 and reaffirmed the Government's commitment to community (Victorian Government 2005a). This launch was closely followed by the release of a discussion paper *Challenges in addressing disadvantage in Victoria* (Victorian Government 2005b) and a month later by the Victorian Government's social policy action plan *A Fairer Victoria: Creating opportunity and addressing disadvantage* (Victorian Government 2005c). Actions in the latter had the strategic objective of building stronger communities. This strategy has since been augmented by an important complementary DVC publication *Actions for community strengthening with local government* (DVC 2005c).

An analysis of the four phases indicates that there has been an increasing shift from piloting and experimenting through projects to a more integrated approach to community strengthening with important roles for state and local government and the community based sector.

### Lessons from the 'experimenting' phase

In 2004, Victoria University undertook a small scale research project to bring together some of the initial learnings about successful community strengthening in Victoria, drawing on the experience of the CBRS over the initial twelve months of its operation. The research, *From strength to strength* (West 2004) drew on the views and experiences of each of the managers

of the seven CBRS components and half of the eighteen CBRS reference group members, as expressed in interviews. CBRS managers visited, interviewed and worked alongside a range of participants in local community strengthening projects. CBRS reference group members were equally connected to local projects but also had a sense of how community strengthening was unfolding from a broader policy perspective. Additionally, the research incorporated information from the quarterly reports of the CBRS services. The research was not intended as comprehensive and empirical but rather qualitative – capturing reactions at the time

One of the challenges of measuring the success or otherwise of community strengthening efforts is the lack of consensus about ‘success’ and how to measure it. DVC has a set of indicators it uses at a meta level to measure the strength of the Victorian ‘community’ and the Victorian Community Indicators project has been developing a set of indicators for use at a local government level.

From *Strength to strength* (West 2004) adopted a research framework based on Considine’s (2004a) four core ingredients of community strengthening as outlined previously:

- social connectedness through local participation;
- local leadership;
- partnerships; and
- local governance.

The research asked a series of questions about the perceptions of interviewees about the factors contributing to successful community strengthening outcomes and the perceived barriers to success. They were also asked what they thought was needed to support community strengthening in the future.

So what is the CBRS? There had been a considerable loss of community development knowledge and experience both inside and outside government in recent years. As a result, the CBRS was established in direct response to the resource needs of the Community Building Demonstration Projects and other State Government funded community strengthening initiatives. In recognition of the resource needs of these newly developing projects, a model of delivery was evolved and DVC tendered the services through a competitive process. The successful bidders commenced operation in September and October 2003 and all services were complete in early 2006.

The CBRS services included the following:

- Support service co-ordination and development;
- Website content management and ongoing development;
- Local data support and brokerage;
- Clearing house;

- Effective practices review of information practices;
- Skills development; and
- Leadership development and mentoring

## **Key elements for success identified by participants**

The research identified a range of key elements for successful community strengthening at the local level. They included the following:

### **Strong local community ownership of community strengthening projects**

Community ownership of initiatives was considered critical to successful community strengthening. Ownership was enhanced when there were long lead in times to the development of local projects, with genuine opportunities for community participation..

### **Strong local leadership**

There were many examples of projects where skilled local leaders had emerged as an outcome of community strengthening efforts. Equally, the absence of leadership and advocates in their community strengthening project locality had impacted negatively on projects’ success. The challenge exists to move ‘beyond the usual suspects’ to engage new leaders, representative of the diverse make up of the neighbourhood. It was recognised that local leadership required long-term investment in skills development as well as giving people real opportunities to participate and represent their community.

### **Participation by ‘hard to reach’ and diverse members of the community**

The research identified the inclusion of a diverse range of people within a local community as an important strategy for strengthening communities. This was sometimes difficult to achieve. In some localities there was a reduced capability for some members of disadvantaged communities, the primary target for neighbourhood renewal and the community building demonstration projects, to engage in local projects. Three possible explanations for this were reduced skill levels, alien processes of engagement, and people being busy simply surviving.

In addition, some population groups were reportedly excluded from participating or overlooked in some community strengthening projects. Participation by groups such as culturally and linguistically diverse, Indigenous and GLBTI communities was reduced as a result of a place-based approach and diversity among community leaders was sometimes difficult to attain.



### Having clearly defined and agreed goals

It was reported that there was sometimes tension between the goals of statewide initiatives and those of local communities, and conflict between stakeholders about what a project was all about could be difficult to manage. Having clearly defined and agreed goals was thought to aide the success of community strengthening efforts.

### Delivery of clear and tangible outcomes for communities

It was clear from the research that consulting and planning with communities was not enough: there needed to be real benefits such as programs, events, services, job opportunities and physical infrastructure as a result of community strengthening projects.

### Partnerships that function well

Given that partnerships are one of the defining features of a community strengthening approach, having partnerships that function well is critical and yet the most commonly reported barrier to successful community strengthening relates to partnerships. Six sets of issues emerged:

- questions of who's in and who's not in the partnership;
- relationships between partners;
- skills for engaging partners;
- having a shared agenda among partners;
- the ability of partners to deliver on local level plans; and
- the challenge for governments in moving from contract manager to partner.

There is clearly a need for a framework for better understanding partnerships in their various forms and includes consideration of how existing partnerships have worked or not worked, the role of government in partnerships, and the tools and resources needed to support partnering efforts.

### Access to adequate resources such as grants, physical infrastructure, information systems and skills development opportunities

Research participants suggested that a stronger connection between physical and social infrastructure would add value to local community efforts.

Additionally, it was reported that skills and knowledge about how to work with communities was critical and yet a gap appears to exist between the need and opportunities for training and skills development for participants at various levels of involvement in community strengthening – from volunteers through to professionals.

### Skilled project workers

Project workers skilled in working directly with communities as well as being able to strategically manage complex projects aided the success of projects. There were sometimes difficulties in locating appropriately skilled workers.

### Supporting community strengthening into the future

When asked about what they thought was needed in the future to support community strengthening efforts, research participants agreed that the next steps in Victoria include moving from a short-term, projects-based effort to a long-term approach, which sees community strengthening as a core business, connected with mainstream policy and programs. Leadership within government is needed to drive a 'scaled up' and sustained approach to community strengthening in Victoria.

### Summary

The research findings suggest that to build stronger social connectedness, local leadership, partnership and local governance community strengthening requires a community-centred approach grounded in an understanding of how to work with communities, in their various forms, and how communities – both generally and specifically – work.

Policies, practices and resources required are those that enable increased participation, ownership, leadership, control and power by communities concerned. In contrast with the view that community strengthening isn't 'rocket science', the research findings suggest that great skill is required for a community-centred approach. The challenge is to ensure that a mainstreamed approach is built on a community-centred approach rather than the more 'top down' approach that governments are renowned for.

### Implications of the learnings for a mainstreamed approach

Phase 4 of the Victorian State Government's approach to community strengthening: mainstreaming and changing the way government works, has well and truly commenced and the research findings suggest there is broad agreement that a mainstreamed and core business approach by government is needed. This section of the paper considers the implications of the research findings and the view that 'seeing like the community' is critical to successful community strengthening. A number of key strategies necessary for a mainstreamed approach to community strengthening are identified. **Social**

## **Connectedness**

The research findings suggest that a community strengthening approach provides an opportunity to connect physical infrastructure to activities aimed at building social connectedness. As a fundamental starting point however, community strengthening efforts ought not be considered an alternative to adequate public investments in communities nor to sound economic policies at a state and federal level.

Communities across Victoria require long-term plans for investment of State Government resources, including both physical and social infrastructure, with partnerships inclusive of all stakeholders. A community strengthening approach provides an opportunity for the Victorian State Government to explore the range of additional ways that contributions can be made. For example, the devolution of infrastructure management of State Government owned resources, such as schools and public land to local governance groups could contribute to building stronger communities.

## **Local leadership**

A 'scaled up' approach to community strengthening provides space to explore broader ways of engaging citizens. The engagement of community members in a projects approach has primarily tended to be restricted to the input of 'locals' into consultations about local priorities and project activities. In some instances this input has extended to project management. A mainstreamed approach, however, requires a full exploration of the role of, and supports for, local leaders as well as opportunities for broader citizen engagement. An opportunity exists to explore local level input into the policy development by Government.

## **Partnership**

A community centred approach suggests that communities would benefit from an approach by Government that includes state level objectives for funded initiatives and programs with scope for local interpretation and innovation. This would allow local governance groups to vary strategies to local conditions whilst operating within a broader policy framework and would potentially contribute to greater confluence and agreement between partners.

Additionally, a mainstreamed approach would benefit from new approaches by the Victorian State Government for developing a more partnering style. The research suggests there is an ongoing tension for the State Government between controlling and letting go of resources and decision making in its community strengthening role. A partnership approach would be enhanced by supports such as tool kits and training and skills development opportunities for all partners.

## **Local governance**

A community-centred approach to community strengthening must provide scope for resourcing communities in their various forms. The research suggest there is much to gain, and to learn, from an approach that includes a range of State Government funded strategies including some for all communities, some for place-based communities, and others for population groups including ethnic, Indigenous and disability groups.

The issue of governance then becomes one of community level governance rather than necessarily local governance. It's about having structures and processes at the level closest to the people being impacted by the decisions.

Finally, as community strengthening is mainstreamed there will be roles for an increasing number of people within state and local government, the community sector and possibly the private sector. The research suggests that skills development and knowledge transfer are important contributors to successful community strengthening. Consequently, there is an increased need to ensure that there is a sustainable strategy and institutional mechanism for continuing to develop the capacities and skills of these key contributors to make certain community centred approaches are achieved. A 'scaled up' approach must provide for groups and individuals in their various roles and with their different needs and include opportunities to increase skills and knowledge, ranging from web-based information or one off workshops to high-level postgraduate courses and intensive summer schools.

## **Conclusion**

Earlier, this paper suggested that community strengthening policy and practice has the potential to contribute to an alternative to a neo-liberalist policy paradigm. The research, however, indicates that these alternatives have not been fully realised in a project approach to community strengthening and that many tensions and challenges continue to exist around factors contributing to successful community strengthening.

A 'scaled up', mainstream approach to community strengthening, informed by lessons from the 'experimenting' phase by the Victorian State Government, has the potential to address some of these challenges and to advance the development of alternative public policy ideas, in particular:

- power devolved to a community level rather than remaining centralised;
- governments
- partnering rather than contracting;
- a community-focused rather than market driven practice;

- outcomes linked to the holistic needs of communities rather than simply economic outcomes; and
- opportunities to explore revitalised democratic practices.

Some may ask whether State Governments *can* steer community strengthening strategies, and a question remains about what the signposts of change would be. However success will depend on whether community strengthening is evolved by the Victorian State Government as a marginal 'add on' or whether a community centred approach is part of a central driver of government decisions, institutions, mechanisms, culture and practice.

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## GLOSSARY OF ACRONYMS

- CBI: Community Building Initiative  
 CBRS: Community Building Resource Service  
 CSF: Community Support Fund  
 DVC: Department of Victorian Communities  
 GLBTI: Gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, transgender and intersex  
 GVT: Growing Victoria Together  
 ICEPA: Institute for Community Engagement and Policy Alternatives  
 VCOSS: Victorian Council of Social Service