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# **What's Wrong With Community Building**

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## INTRODUCTION

Although the title of this paper is a statement, if it was a question the answer would be 'Just about everything!'

Government-funded community building in Australia promises to be the cure-all for our community problems. Terms such as empowering communities, local solutions to local problems, bottom-up decision-making, community capacity building, neighborhood renewal, community regeneration, social capital building, community strengthening, sustainable communities, triple bottom line, community-business partnerships and so on form the new rhetoric of Australian governments' community policies.

With its emphasis on working together to build and strengthen communities through the empowerment of local people, the current crop of policies and programs is intuitively appealing. However, it is our belief that outcomes overall will be disappointing and most benefits gained by communities will be modest and temporary.

We do not claim to be experts in the area of community building (if there is such a thing as a community-building expert), but as community workers and citizens we do grapple on a day-to-day basis with the increasingly complex issues and problems facing the towns in which we live and work. We make no apology for the fact that our analysis is more common sense than it is sophisticated and is based more on observation and personal experience from our own communities rather than on an exhaustive examination of the literature and empirical research.

While our opinions have originated mainly from 'where we sit', we have been influenced variously by some of the writers and commentators who have something to say about 'community', most notably Jim Ife, Noel Pearson, Susan Kenny, Robert Putnam, Eva Cox, Peter Kenyon, Robert Theobald, Don Edgar, Paul Brickell, Stuart Rees, Saul Alinsky, Thomas Moore and others.

## PROBLEMS WITH 'DOING TO' COMMUNITIES

The fundamental principles underpinning community building are based largely on approaches which emphasise self-determination and self-reliance, ie. that communities need to be empowered to manage their own affairs, which involves formulating their own solutions and the processes involved to achieve them. The problem with this is that most of the current crop of community-building policies and programs occurs within a strong, framework of government priorities, government policies and government processes which have been *imposed on* communities rather than have *emanated from* them.

With little reference to communities beforehand, governments have decided that the community-building approach, most aspects of which seem to have been imported from the United States and the United Kingdom, contains the best strategies to strengthen communities and address their problems. Further, governments have chosen the key principles, the underpinning theories, the various models (eg.

community capacity building, neighborhood renewal, community regeneration, etc.), the funding eligibility criteria and application processes. Most application forms for government funding require groups to indicate clearly how their project is compatible with the government priorities stated in the accompanying Information for Applicants documentation.

Community building is simply another government-driven solution for community problems. Our main concern with this is that the overall failure of successive governments in Australia to have a major impact on serious community problems such as poverty, long-term unemployment, family breakdown, homelessness, and so on indicates that generally government solutions do not work. Governments, in our view, have a far better understanding of the basic theory of community building than they do its complex practice.

## **PROBLEMS WITH EMPOWERMENT**

Another problem with community building is the idea of governments 'empowering' communities. Empowerment is being presented as the cornerstone of community problem solving. The rhetoric of empowerment, such as 'local solutions to local problems' and 'bottom-up decision-making', is being preached ad nauseam by government workers and echoed parrot fashion by those they fund. However, it is rarely clear what they mean by 'empowerment'. Nowadays the term is used so frequently without definition or with widely varying definitions that at best it is confusing and at worst it has no meaning.

For starters, it is not clear what 'bottom-up decision-making' means. Normally, most references to being at the bottom have an overriding negative connotation, eg. bottom of the barrel, bottom of the class, starting at the bottom, rock bottom, etc. In most instances it would seem that being located at the bottom is not a desirable place to be. So, with bottom-up decision-making, is there anything negative being implied about the people at the bottom? Who are the people at the bottom? Community people? Why have they been assigned the bottom position? Why are they not at the top? Who is at the top? Who has decided who is at the bottom and who is at the top? Why wasn't a linear model used to describe the roles of government and community in decision making? Does the language of 'bottom-up decision-making' simply reinforce the unequal relationship between government (at the top) and communities (at the bottom)?

To continue the confusion, it is not clear how much power governments want communities to have through the process of empowerment. Does empowering communities mean giving them a major role decision making, or simply an opportunity for some kind of role in the decision-making process? If it is the latter, how much of a role and for what kind of decisions? Is it a genuine opportunity for community members or a token one designed to create an impression of democracy through community participation?

If local people are included in some decision making but excluded from other decision making, are they truly empowered? Is power which is taken by a community stronger and longer lasting than the power which is conferred on them by

governments through an orchestrated process such as a community-building program? Can a community be truly empowered if a proportion of its population remains disempowered because of poverty and other disadvantage? Is addressing the structural causes of people's disadvantage (income, employment, education, housing, health, etc.) an inseparable aspect of empowering a community?

There is a long list of similar questions highlighting the problems with the theory and process of empowering communities. It would seem to us that governments are making few attempts either to ask or answer these kinds of difficult questions.

Also, governments seem to believe that power is a flexible commodity that they can give and then remove as the situation suits. For example, while governments through their community-building policies maintain that they aim to empower our communities, they remind us regularly about how powerless we really are when they either ignore or dismiss our opinions on local issues.

On the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria, where we live and work, there is a long list of examples where Federal, State and Local Government have disregarded local residents' views about social, environmental and economic issues. It is frustrating and disheartening for enthusiastic community-minded people to have their concerns about local matters dismissed regularly by governments.

Ironically, governments need to have the active support of these same passionate community-minded people for community building to be successful. It is unrealistic, however, to expect enthusiastic responses from them when so many of their views on other matters have been ignored or dismissed.

We do not deny that government decision-making is difficult within current complex social, environmental and economic circumstances. However, often government decision-making processes are not clear to ordinary community people who feel increasingly that in making decisions governments are less than transparent, inconsistent, sometimes deceptive and always politically motivated. While the integrity of governments and their workers may need to be scrutinised from time to time, it is our view that most of the problems with empowerment that we have highlighted in this paper probably are more to do with naivete than dishonesty.

Whatever empowerment means, history indicates that it is unlikely to be permanent, despite all the talk about sustainable community building. A change in government, for example, usually results in a shift in belief about the nature and extent of the role of communities in decision-making. Communities, therefore, can be empowered or disempowered arbitrarily based on governments' whims and fancies. Communities also can become empowered or disempowered by events not entirely within their or governments' control, such as an upturn or downturn in the local economy caused by the arrival or withdrawal of industry, decisions made by global markets, and factors such as good or bad weather.

## **PROBLEMS WITH GOVERNING AND EMPOWERING**

Empowering communities implies making them equal partners with governments in decision-making. This process is difficult for governments because it assumes a joint setting of priorities with each partner having a say about the required resourcing. Usually governments struggle when they have to accommodate a range of perspectives which are different from their own. Also, while the process may be democratic, it is not necessarily efficient given that it is quicker and less costly to have fewer players involved in decision-making (in theory at least). Governments which share their power with communities are open to criticism for being inefficient and lacking strong leadership. This situation, therefore, lends itself to governments allowing communities only minimal or token opportunities to participate in government decision-making.

Democratically elected governments' mandate to rule gives them the power to make decisions. In a democratic society, however, the trick is to get the balance right between being democratic and being 'less democratic', and when to be which. Balance and timing are where governments seem to struggle with the application of power. Their tendency to use power inconsistently without explanation and their characteristic reluctance to share authority makes their talk of empowering communities appear little more than hollow rhetoric.

## **PROBLEMS WITH RE-EMPOWERING**

Further compounding the problem of empowerment is the belief that communities which have been disempowered previously can be re-empowered later. This approach presupposes a high level of resilience in communities. Communities, however, can be fragile constructs.

For example, communities which have been battered by negative social and economic change can become increasingly vulnerable, discouraged, depressed and pessimistic about the possibility of recovery. New government community-building initiatives which promise to be a solution for community problems are unlikely to generate widespread enthusiasm in these communities.

Exacerbating this situation is that communities affected by long-term disadvantage have had to endure generations of government-funded, short-term experimental projects designed by 'experts' from outside, which have been full of promises but ultimately have not lived up to expectations. In these communities disillusionment with and cynicism about government solutions are common.

## **PROBLEMS WITH EXCLUDING GRASS-ROOTS GROUPS**

Another problem that we have observed in applying the policy to practice is that often it excludes important individuals and groups who are essential to effective community building, especially those from the grass-roots sector.

The importance of local people being involved in attempts to build and strengthen communities is emphasised strongly in the literature that we have read and is reflected clearly in government community-building policy. Most of the writers and commentators named in the introduction to this paper, in one way or another, have highlighted repeatedly the importance of the knowledge, wisdom, passion and skills of ordinary community members being recognised, fostered and placed at the foundation of efforts to develop stronger communities.

### **Government support inaccessible**

Often, however, government support for community-building projects is not accessible to many grass-roots community groups. Frequently, small community groups (especially the smallest of the small) do not receive information about the available opportunities for government support because they are not on mainstream mailing lists nor do they network widely with mainstream groups. Also, as wide community networking among groups has decreased, especially in bigger communities, often mainstream groups are not aware of the existence of some smaller groups.

Even when small groups are informed about the opportunities for government support, often funding application processes impede rather than assist their efforts. Application processes in particular show little understanding or appreciation of the grass-roots sector, and are geared more towards bigger, better-resourced and more informed groups. For example, because they are not familiar with the concepts and contemporary language of community building (despite the fact that they are doing it!), it is difficult for them to address funding criteria adequately.

Application forms, despite attempts to make them simpler, are still confusing and sometimes daunting to groups uninitiated in the process of applying for government funds. It has been our experience when we have been asked by small groups to help them with their applications that they do not understand the accompanying Information for Applicants documentation, they misinterpret questions easily and sometimes they are confused totally by the process.

Often small groups do not have formally stated business or strategic plans, annual reports or constitutions, all of which commonly are required by funders. Many small groups do not possess influential friends and partners who can sponsor or endorse applications for funding or challenge the decisions of governments not to fund them.

Often small community groups, especially those which are operated by just one or a couple of people, are deemed suspect or 'tin-pot shows' by government funding bodies hesitant to take risks with funding. It has been our observation that individuals and very small groups which operate independently can do remarkable work in their communities. However, they are unable to obtain financial support to cover their basic operating costs from overly cautious governments which have defined eligibility very narrowly, which want to avoid incurring the associated administrative costs of funding a plethora of different groups, and which gain greater political mileage from supporting bigger and higher-profile community organisations.

Also, because commonly small community groups require only modest one-off grants for their projects, they are less likely to become dependent on government funding. Small groups, therefore, cannot be kept in check in the same way that that governments have exerted their authority over bigger agencies which are government-funding dependent. Funding a large ‘rabble’ of unrestrained community groups has never been particularly appealing to governments, either for administrative or control reasons.

### **Impersonal administrative processes**

The length of time it takes government funding bodies to assess proposals and applications can be many months and shows a lack of understanding about the essence and motivation of small community groups. Often the main driving forces for small groups are members’ enthusiasm for and commitment to their causes. The proposed projects for which they are seeking financial support are connected intrinsically to their values and beliefs about how the community in which they live can be improved. For them, their application for government support is not simply an impersonal administrative process, but often it is treated as such by funding bodies. For example, commonly governments take four or five months to decide not to fund a group, with no encouragement given or constructive feedback provided either during or after the process. This can be severely demoralising for groups which may feel as a consequence that their worth to their community has been devalued and their visions, as reflected in their application for funding, judged by government to be without merit.

### **Important knowledge inaccessible**

Another important area where grass-roots community groups and community-minded individuals are excluded is their accessibility to up-to-date information and new knowledge which is obtained from conferences, seminars, workshops and other similar functions. Attendance at these types of events can enhance their understanding of community issues and problems, the strategies being proposed to address them, and provide them with inspiration, encouragement and a better appreciation of their own role in the local community. Also, it provides them with opportunities to meet and connect with a wide range of other community groups and organisations, including representatives from government as well as other funding bodies.

As mentioned previously, not being on mainstream information mailing lists contributes to their exclusion, but another important contributor is the prohibitive cost of attending such events. While some forums on community building and related topics are free, usually conferences, seminars and workshops incur a cost – and often a substantial one. More often than not, attending these events is not a realistic proposition for independent community members or members of grass-roots community groups. Most often conferences, especially interstate and overseas ones, are the exclusive domain of more senior staff from mainstream organisations, senior practitioners and academics whose conference costs are covered by their employing organisations or their higher salaries.

The exclusion of grass-roots sector representatives from conferences and other similar functions raises further serious questions about the validity of efforts to empower and strengthen communities through the involvement of local people. Keeping knowledge about important community matters exclusive to government workers and professionals from larger mainstream organisations is an elitist approach and keeps the power securely with those who currently have it. It is not uncommon, for example, for community policies to have their origin at conferences where government policy makers or advocates from larger non-government community agencies are inspired by particular speakers or prompted by both formal and informal discussion among participants. Rarely do people from the grass-roots sector have the opportunity to participate in the earliest stages of community policy formation.

While there is a general assumption, and sometimes a formal expectation by employers, that conference participants will pass on what they have learned to others, it is not common for the new knowledge to be passed down all the way to people at the grass-roots level in communities.

It does not make sense to deprive people of knowledge which is crucial to their efforts to build their communities. Through missing out on important knowledge and up-to-date information (not just from conferences), sometimes local people are not equipped sufficiently to make the best possible decisions for their communities. It is not uncommon for local decision-making to be based on a limited grasp of the issues involved and insufficient knowledge of the possible responses.

## **PROBLEMS WITH LANGUAGE**

In our experience, a serious problem with community building is the language used to describe it in government documentation and by government workers and professional community workers speaking about it. Earlier we referred to the problems of jargon in the funding application process.

While government workers and community workers are familiar with the language from governments' new community policies, usually ordinary community people are not. Because the former are confronted with the language of community building daily, they use it instinctively. To hear them speak to community people about building social capital, increasing their community's capacity in a sustainable way, and renewing their neighborhoods is sometimes amusing, but mostly it is concerning. This is because language is the vehicle which mediates values and culture and thereby provides the description for people's experiences and reality. The use of language, therefore, which is outside the experience and reality of most grass-roots groups and individuals in the community provides yet again another serious barrier to their inclusion.

Compounding this problem is that many government workers and professional community workers appear to have only a very basic understanding of the actual concepts behind the language they are using. Consequently, often they struggle to explain the concepts adequately in layperson's terms to uninitiated people from the community.

An outcome of this is that to curry favor with government and professional community workers, or even just to communicate better with them by using common speech, the community people mimic the rhetoric, but often without really understanding it well. Before long, a common language of community-building language has developed which gives an impression that all using it mean the same thing. Because, however, the various people involved have a different or limited understanding of the concepts and the accompanying terminology, sometimes the exchanges between them have little meaning. Without a shared understanding of the issues and a common language to communicate about them, it is almost impossible to engage in effective community building.

## **PROBLEMS WITH COMMUNITY SPIRIT**

Community spirit, among other things, involves residents having a feeling of belonging in their town or region, having pride in and enthusiasm for their community and feeling that they have personal responsibility for its well being. It involves also a desire to become involved co-operatively with other local people who share similar feelings about their community.

In this regard, another weakness with community-building is that it relies substantially on the presence of or the capacity to build strong community spirit. Currently there are a number of serious hurdles in the way of building or re-building strong community spirit in many Australian communities.

### **Dismantling community infrastructure**

The dismantling of key community infrastructure by governments and businesses has caused severe damage to community spirit in many towns and regions. For example, the withdrawal from these communities of banks and other private industry, schools, hospitals, health and welfare agencies, post offices and other government offices has played a major role in eroding community spirit. These types of institutions bring people together, support and connect them in a variety of ways, and bring about the formation of a socially cohesive community.

### **Competing for government contracts**

Doing further damage to community spirit has been governments forcing community groups doing similar work to be more competitive in vying for government contracts. Apart from instances where groups have collaborated to tender for government contracts, commonly it has meant community groups becoming individualistic and secretive to win contracts.

As well as creating strong rivalry in some communities, the tendering process has brought out the worst in some groups which appear to have adopted 'rubbery' principles in order to pursue and receive funding from any source, virtually by any means and subject to any conditions. Accounts are common of community groups using underhanded tactics in competing for government contracts. As a result, the level of trust has been eroded among groups in many communities.

Trust is an integral part of good working relationships between community groups. It takes time to develop; it can be fragile and as a result it can be damaged easily. Trust is not a commodity that can be manipulated in the way that governments have through creating intense competitiveness between groups.

Often what is lost through competitiveness is the sense of solidarity that is required to advocate for each other and the broader community. It is doubtful whether strong competitive spirit and strong community spirit can co-exist in a community-building context among groups doing the same or similar work.

### **Growing disadvantage**

Further contributing to the difficulties in building community spirit are the growing numbers of disadvantaged people in communities. As more people experience severe hardship, especially through low income and the associated pressures and difficulties, they become more inward looking rather than community minded. This erodes community spirit. Usually, people living in severely impoverished circumstances are preoccupied with meeting their own basic needs for survival, and are less inclined to take an active interest in wider community concerns and join in with others to address them. Simply inviting them to become involved without addressing the fundamental causes of their disadvantage is unlikely to increase their participation and personal sense of community spirit, other than perhaps temporarily.

### **Ignoring community opinion**

Another contributor to a lessening of community spirit is governments' continued failure in recent times to listen to or act upon community opinion. Through having their concerns about local matters ignored or dismissed by governments, local people have become frustrated, demoralised and sceptical about the possibility of change. Now many people feel that they have little influence over government decision making, so do not bother to even try. For many otherwise community-minded people, passive concern about local issues is about the best that they can muster nowadays.

### **Growing indifference**

Some people are deterred from involvement in their communities because they feel overwhelmed by the complexity of local issues. Others choose not to be involved because governments have downplayed the seriousness of problems or, in talking up their achievements, have suggested that current policies and programs have problems well in hand.

However, in a world which is experiencing rapid and often unpredictable change, where it is apparent that the best imaginable as well as the worst imaginable can become a reality overnight, life has become more uncertain and more demanding for people. As a consequence, people generally (not just those experiencing severe disadvantage) seem to have become more inward looking and less actively concerned about the plight of others outside their own circle of family and friends. Examples abound of growing community indifference and tolerance to the hardship and deprivations experienced by many people. While logically this situation makes it an

ideal time to be concerned with building community spirit, the pre-conditions are far from ideal.

## **PROBLEMS WITH SHORT TERMISM**

Another major problem with community building is its preoccupation with pursuing short-term outcomes.

In recent times we have been disadvantaged by the 'time-is-money' approach to community planning, resulting in pressure to package things up quickly by impatient bureaucracies which, for reasons of economic efficiency and electoral expediency, need answers promptly to the who, what, why, when, where, how and how much questions. Not nearly enough time has been allocated to discussion or evaluation of the strengths, limitations and overall potential of concepts and strategies. Bureaucratic practice has been to demand that raw ideas be translated into programs in the shortest possible time.

As a consequence, many of our community programs have been poorly thought through at the planning stage, inadequate or sometimes no consultation has occurred with communities, and commonly programs have been inflexible, sometimes a nuisance, occasionally damaging to communities, almost always temporary and not effective.

Government solutions almost always overlook the fact that to build strong communities and to address major problems, sustained efforts over many years are required. 'Long term' for politicians and bureaucrats, however, seems to mean the duration of their government's term in office or the length of their employment contracts.

Often governments have been too hasty to abandon community programs when they fail to achieve expected outcomes within unreasonably short timelines. Twelve-month programs or one-off grants do little more than dabble in community building unless they are a forerunner to more sustainable approaches.

Major overhauls of community policies and programs every time there is a change in government is not an effective way to strengthen communities or address their problems. The refusal of governments to adopt widespread bipartisan approaches to community building to ensure the continuance of effective policies and strategies beyond any one government's term of office is a major deficiency with community building. When governments change, local communities can be harmed by the post-election withdrawal of community projects, especially ones which have proven to be effective or have entailed extensive community involvement and substantial use of local resources.

## **PROBLEMS WITH FINANCIAL SUSTAINABILITY**

Potentially good community projects should not be judged ineligible for government support because auspicing groups cannot produce a financial sustainability plan for

when the government funding period ends. Sometimes there are no realistic alternatives to government funding for good community projects, especially those involving larger amounts of money. It does not make sense for governments to reject potentially good community projects or to discontinue supporting very successful ones after the end of a limited period of funding if the community group has been unable to locate an alternative source of financial support.

Although governments have encouraged community groups to pursue partnerships with business as an alternative source of funding, often this is not a viable option for smaller groups. It is unrealistic for governments to expect small groups to raise large amounts of funding from the business sector when competition for funding from the latter is so strong. Bigger and better-resourced community groups are much better placed to win support from business. Also, business groups, especially big businesses, usually prefer to support larger, higher-profile groups which can enhance their reputation as socially responsible companies. This is referred to as cause-related marketing and brand building. Many grass-roots community groups are barely known beyond their own small neighborhoods and, therefore, are of little use as marketing tools for companies. While it is true that smaller community-based businesses may be more inclined to support smaller community groups, smaller companies have fewer resources to share.

One of the great strengths of small community groups is that usually they are able to operate efficiently because of low overheads, especially low staffing overheads. Commonly, though, they do not have the required number of personnel or the necessary financial resources to embark upon a fundraising program to raise money for their projects, especially for bigger projects involving larger amounts of money. Small community groups and their projects should not be seen as inadequate and deemed ineligible for government support because of their inability to fundraise.

Governments want communities to achieve greater financial self-reliance through community building, but even if this is possible to achieve with particular projects, the process cannot be rushed and certainly not at a predetermined, universal and unrealistic pace set by government policy which takes no account of unique project and community circumstances.

## **PROBLEMS WITH OVERSEAS SOLUTIONS**

Despite the new catchcry 'local solutions to local problems', governments in Australia have a long tradition of importing solutions for local problems from overseas.

The first problem with overseas solutions is that some community-building strategies seem to have been imported prior to sufficient evidence being obtained that they have achieved any more than modest, short-term outcomes. It would appear that governments in Australia have spent more time pursuing community-building ideas from overseas which sound like they might work rather than searching for strong evidence that they actually do work.

Some of the main assumptions underpinning imported community-building strategies appear to be that they are universally suitable and better than 'home-grown' varieties. Neither is always the case, however, as community programs designed overseas are tailored for unique social, economic and environmental circumstances. This does not mean that we cannot learn and benefit from them, but when they are transplanted here, usually insufficient thought seems to be given to the wide cultural and community differences and how these may impact on the expected outcomes. In most instances, community building from country to country will share similar principles, but local differences require individual strategies to be interpreted and applied quite differently.

Effective community building is a complex pursuit. It requires a thorough understanding of a particular community – its social, environmental and economic make-up; its particular role within the region; its relationships with other communities within the region; how the community relates to the different levels of government; the issues and problems of the community - their history, the theories which have been proposed locally and universally to explain them; the local politics; the local protocols for decision-making (formal and informal); the various personalities and their individual agendas, and so on.

The unique combination of these factors in one way or another almost always will have a bearing on the nature, the process and the outcomes of local community-building strategies. None of them should be excluded from the community-building equation because only through possessing a good understanding of the complex interrelationship between them can a community-building project reach its maximum potential.

## **PROBLEMS WITH COMMUNITY WORK**

As we have maintained, effective community building is a complex pursuit requiring extensive local as well as universal knowledge about how communities work. Apart from the problems with current community building practice which we have highlighted thus far, there are a number of major problems confronting professional community workers which have a strong bearing on their ability to engage in effective community building.

Despite its importance, community work in Australia is a neglected profession. More often than not our community workers are untrained or undertrained; have salaries lower than other community service professionals; have limited opportunities for other than basic training in their field of work; lack adequate support and supervision (especially in lone-worker positions); possess a limited career structure; and often have no job security because limited-tenure jobs attached to short-term community projects are an intrinsic characteristic of the community work profession.

Generally community workers are multi-skilled professionals, but often their skills are not sufficiently developed to enable them to undertake well enough the wide range of complex tasks involved in community building. Because many community workers are faced continually with having to renew their employment, it means that they do not always have the opportunity to build other than basic knowledge, skills and

experience in certain areas of their work, develop sound knowledge of one particular community, or be able to spend long enough in one community on one project for it to have a major impact.

Also, effective community work is dependent on developing strong relationships with key people in the employing community. This is difficult to do when a worker has to move from community to community on a frequent or regular basis to seek employment. Short-term employment contracts do not allow workers to get to know an individual community intimately, or to develop the types of strong relationships required to maximise community-building efforts.

Despite their experience, skills, enthusiasm and commitment to their field of work, newly appointed community workers who have come from another community start a long way behind equivalent workers who either live in or have worked in the employing community for a number of years.

## **PROBLEMS WITH EXCLUDING SPIRITUALITY**

There are many people today who consider spirituality a critical component of their overall health and wellbeing and their connectedness within their community. Yet the community-building policy and literature with which we are familiar tends to ignore the relevance of spirituality for thinking about community. We need to ask what are the sources we use in reflecting about community and where is the gap?

There are a number of sources that we draw on to help us understand the experience of people in communities, and specifically the way in which people's sense of community is shaped. Among these sources are sociology, psychology, economics and philosophy. However there is another source, often neglected, which may be equally as important as the others - theology.

Theology, simply defined, is faith seeking understanding. There are many people who seek to understand their life experience in their community within a faith context. For these people the results of their endeavors strengthen their sense of connectedness to their community and identify what they may be capable of achieving as human beings.

Theological reflection can situate the immediate experiences of people's lives and their sense of who they are within a broader context of meaning. People can become acutely aware of being connected to others by means of a long and rich tradition, as well as of being surrounded by love and support in times of shared suffering. They realise that theirs is an inheritance of a history and culture which must be nurtured by the celebration of both a shared memory and hope for the future.

It is suggested that the sense a people have of their potential goodness far outweighs the worst evil anyone may perpetrate, together with the lived experience of sharing the suffering and being compassionate, supportive and hopeful, is a potent force for healing and building community.

Theology is a source which argues that the human person is not simply engaged in an individual exercise of self-actualisation or even self-fulfillment. The choices made are not ones that are necessarily practical but are based on what is the faithful and responsible response. This counters strongly notions of individualism, self-interest, market forces and so on. It is a source which allows thinking about community to include notions of love, caring, attachment, responsibility and hope.

## CONCLUSION

This paper highlights only a small number of the problems associated with community building as we see them. After commencing to write and then discuss with one another what we had written as we progressed, it became clear that the handful of concerns we had thought about including initially represented only the proverbial 'tip of the iceberg'. Of course, this is not an uncommon experience for writers and researchers. In addition, it became clear to us that most issues that we had identified originally were far more complicated than we had first anticipated - also not an unusual experience.

For us, this paper is a reflection of our own journey as community workers wanting to help with the process of making our communities better places to live, but struggling with the complexities of the task, considering our own competencies (or rather, lack of them), and questioning the validity of the tools that governments have made available to us. This paper has provided us with an opportunity to recognise some of the 'errors of our ways', and to amend some of our old, well-intentioned but misguided ideas and methods. It has become clear to us that we still have more amending to do.

While we have been critical about government community building policy and processes, we do not believe that government-funded community building is without merit completely. We believe that current policies and programs will provide people with opportunities to develop their communities and to address local issues and problems. The ingenuity of local people who are enthusiastic about and committed to their communities can never be underestimated. Even with the most basic of materials and rudimentary tools, talented, passionate and determined people will create or build something that will benefit their community.

However, we believe also that the problems highlighted in this paper are significant barriers to government-funded community building achieving major and enduring positive change in communities. We have not underestimated the benefits of minor changes and small successes for communities, but so many of the current issues and problems facing our towns require a long-term commitment to major change.

Usually, these types of community development papers conclude with recommendations for radical and often unrealistic changes to the status quo. We have resisted that option on the basis of it not being helpful to readers or to us. If we were experts, we might provide readers with recommendations for successful community building, but as we stated in the introduction, we are not experts.

Therefore, we would like to conclude by inviting you on a journey of self discovery with us. We encourage you to examine the processes, structures and language which underpin your engagement with communities. Above all, we urge you not to ignore the passion, creativity, spirit and soul of the communities within which you work.

We recommend strongly that all those involved in community building read and re-read regularly Jim Ife's *Community Development* 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition (2002). We believe that this enlightening text describes ideally but realistically how effective community building can occur. Chapter 5, *Change from below*, and Chapter 6, *The process of community development*, are especially relevant to the content of this paper.

We are happy to be contacted to discuss further any of the issues presented in this paper, to hear about your experiences and learn about your projects, and to share with you some of the current ideas and projects with which we are involved. Our contact details are:

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## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**John Murphy** is Manager of Mornington Peninsula Community Connections, an independent and free advisory service for small grass-roots community groups on the Mornington Peninsula in Victoria. Established in 1997, originally the service was funded by The Body Shop in Australia. Now the service is funded privately by businessman (and qualified social worker) Barrie Thomas, former co-owner of The Body Shop in Australia and currently co-owner of The Body Shop in New Zealand.

Community Connections provides advice and support to small community agencies with program planning and evaluation, policy development, public relations, fundraising, staff recruitment and training, social action and a variety of other areas relevant to their work.

John worked for 10 years in the printing industry before obtaining a Bachelor of Social Work (Hons.) in 1981 and a PhD in 1992 from Monash University. John's social work background was in child and family services and community work.

He worked for seven years as a lecturer in the Department of Social Work and Human Services at Monash University where he taught community agency management and community work.

Prior to his position at Monash University John was co-ordinator of Frankston Community Support and Information Centre – a grass-roots agency established and staffed by community volunteers. After leaving employment at the Centre he remained on the management committee for six years, five of which he was chairman.

**Joe Cauchi** has been with the Mornington Peninsula Shire as Director of Sustainable Communities for three years. The group has responsibility for children, youth and families; aged care and disability; recreation and culture; and libraries. Also part of the group's portfolio is The Briars and the Regional Gallery. Prior to joining the Mornington Peninsula Shire, he was in a similar role at the City of Boroondara.

In 1990, Joe worked at the Family Court of Australia as Regional Director of Counselling and had responsibility for the Southern Region of the Court that included South Australia, Tasmania and Canberra.

Between 1982 and 1990, Joe worked with a number of non-government agencies including the Mission of St James and St John (now Anglicare) and the Catholic Family Welfare Bureau. He also spent a brief period with the Shire of Hastings before amalgamation.

Joe worked in child welfare with the Children's Aid Society – a non-government statutory child welfare agency between 1973 and 1982 in Toronto, Ontario where he also completed his social work training.

Joe gained a Bachelor of Arts at Monash in 1973, Bachelor of Social Work (Hons) from York University in 1976 and his Master of Social Work from the University of Toronto in 1982. In 1992, Joe gained a Bachelor of Theology from the Catholic Theological College.