

Sounds Good But Does It Work? Assets-Based Community Development in Practice

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Abstract

The New South Wales Central Coast is a rapidly changing and growing community with all the excitement and challenges this brings to long established residents and newcomers alike.

The enhancement of social capital through community building is a key ingredient in positive outcomes for individuals, families, neighbourhoods and local communities but what clues do we have to what works in practice?

Community building which uses an assets-based community development model linked to three community engagement dimensions of bonding, bridging and linking has given us important clues on how the role of community worker as catalyst can work effectively at the local level.

The Killarney Vale Bateau Bay Tumby Umbi Community Building Network with its many partners and varied projects such as The Wave Community Newspaper, Sports-in-the-Neighbourhood, family discos and playgroups provides some examples, whilst the San Remo/Blue Haven area provides another with its Indigenous and international community linking and leadership enhancement activities and community garden development team.

So it sounds good, we think it works and practice clues provide possibilities for application in other neighbourhoods and communities

Keywords

Assets, bonding, bridging, linking, partnerships

Central Coast Region Overview

The New South Wales Central Coast includes the two local government areas of Gosford City and Wyong Shire. The region stretches from the Hawkesbury River in the south to Lake Macquarie in the north. It is bordered by the Pacific Ocean to the east and the Dooralong and Yarramalong valleys and Mangrove Mountain Plateau to the west (Central Coast Regional Profile & Social Atlas 2004).

The area has many features which make it a beautiful, exciting and vibrant place to live including:

- a central location between the major population centres of Sydney and Newcastle with good road and rail links
- the abundance of natural attractions including ocean beaches, bushlands and mountains
- productive agricultural land, forest and mineral resources
- a range of manufacturing and service industries
- a long-established tourist industry.

Importantly, the Central Coast is one of the fastest growing areas in Australia with a population of approximately 300,000. The population of Wyong Shire alone is projected to grow to approximately 200,000 by 2026 (Central Coast Regional Profile & Social Atlas 2004). This brings with it challenges for long established residents and newcomers alike as the following indicators suggest:

- The region has grown 24 per cent over the past decade
- 1 in 5 people are under 13 years. The number over 65 years continues to grow.
- Higher unemployment than New South Wales overall
- Large numbers of single parent families
- Relatively poor public transport
- High levels of child abuse notifications
- Consistently high levels of requests for Apprehended Violence Orders through local courts (The Benevolent Society 2002 unpublished).

The Benevolent Society's establishment on the Central Coast

The Benevolent Society, Australia's oldest charity, began working on the New South Wales Central Coast in 2002 as part of The Benevolent Society's mission:

"To anticipate changing social needs and drive innovative and effective responses in high need communities".

The 2002 Benevolent Society Strategic Review identified the Central Coast as a possible area for The Benevolent Society to further develop its 'place' model (The Benevolent Society 2002 unpublished).

Community building on the Central Coast

The Benevolent Society, working in partnership with local residents, government and non-government organisations, community groups and others, has adopted an assets-based community development model linked to three community engagement dimensions of bonding, bridging and linking.

By employing community workers to act as a catalyst in the community building process The Benevolent Society has been able to encourage and support partnerships to develop more understanding and, consequently, actions based both on the assets-based community

development and bonding, bridging, linking models. Although these models are being applied across the Central Coast Region, we concentrate here on two specific communities: Killarney Vale Bateau Bay Tumbi Umbi and San Remo/Blue Haven.

The Killarney Vale Bateau Bay Tumbi Umbi Community Building Network

Killarney Vale, Bateau Bay and Tumbi Umbi are three linked suburbs in Southern Wyong Shire. One of the unique features of the area is the large number (approximately 600) of Department of Housing homes and units in the Bateau Bay and Killarney Vale areas — mainly located in the large estate previously known as Pacific Del Mar. The area is relatively unique in Wyong Shire in that the gap between residents who are socio-economically secure and those who are socio-economically disadvantaged is highlighted by an imaginary boundary between those who live in the Department of Housing estate and those who do not.

Over the past two years a strong network of service providers, local community groups and residents have been working together in what has become the Killarney Vale Bateau Bay Tumbi Umbi Community Building Network. The Network has adopted an assets based community development model as we work together and within the community.

Eves, Howard et al. (2003), in explaining this model, state that:

“Every community can identify things it does not have (needs) and things it does have (assets). A strong community is built upon identifying and then mobilising its assets” (p. 6).

Identifying and mobilising assets, particularly in and around the Department of Housing estate, has resulted in a range of exciting grass-roots projects identified by local residents who are sharing their many skills to make their community a better place to live for themselves, their families and their neighbours. The Network is able to work alongside residents in a partnership based around respect for what the community has rather than what it lacks.

Projects to date include Bugalugz Playgroup, Sports-in-the-Neighbourhood, Family Discos, *The Wave* community newspaper and KBT Open Day. Although each project has many and varied aims they all have a common goal of positively influencing levels of social capital in the community.

These projects teach us important lessons about engaging individuals and communities, an important precursor to increasing community capacity and levels of social capital.

As Putnam 2000 cited in Jeffrey 2004 indicates:

“Social capital matters for children’s successful development in life” (p. 13).

Two particular grass-roots community projects illustrate the ideas expressed so far. Firstly, the Bugalugz Playgroup and secondly, Sports-in-the-Neighbourhood.

Bugalugz Playgroup

So what's the big deal about another playgroup?

For the parents living in the Department of Housing estate it's a very big deal, as past attempts by agencies to set up playgroups have been unsuccessful. This time something different has happened and here are some clues as to what that could be:

- Through the Network parents have got to know a whole range of people representing different agencies such as the Neighbourhood Centre co-ordinator, the Department of Housing Community Development Worker and the Community Partnerships Facilitator from the Benevolent Society. So relationships formed well before any suggestion of setting up a playgroup or the Sports-in-the-Neighbourhood project occurred. Importantly, these relationships were formed around the assets (i.e. local knowledge, skills, talents) of the parents rather than using a needs or deficits model with its implicit power relationship imbalance.
- As levels of trust and confidence increased, parents suggested that they would like a playgroup within walking distance of their homes and, at this point, Network members were able to offer a range of coordinated support. For example:
 - Working alongside parents to develop a flyer which they were to letterbox drop around the neighbourhood
 - Printing of a flyer by Wyong Council through their Community Development Worker
 - Funding for 12 families to join The Playgroup Association covering the cost of two years' fees provided by the Department of Housing
 - Funding of toys and equipment chosen by the parents by the Department of Housing and The Benevolent Society
 - Rent-free room at the Neighbourhood Centre for weekly playgroup sessions
 - Promotion in *The Wave* community newspaper (another project of the KBT Network).

Sports-in-the-Neighbourhood

The weekly Sports-in-the-Neighbourhood developed out of the local community's interest in providing children with a healthy, constructive means of activity and fun in the local area. Parents were keen to be involved in both organising how sports would work and running the activities so, once again, mobilising assets of the local community have been crucial to the success of the project so far. Parents and young people selected the sports equipment by talking together and with others in their neighbourhood. There are approximately 36 children and young people aged between one and seventeen attending each week, with eight adults facilitating age-appropriate activities.

The KBT Network has again been able to offer a range of coordinated support. For example:

- Dept of Tourism, Sport and Recreation Development Worker facilitated project with parents, including training for community leaders and facilitators
- Funding for sports equipment from Wyong Council Sports Grants
- Access to playing field next to The Cottage — a community centre in the middle of the Department of Housing estate
- Promotion through *The Wave* community newspaper, including a front-page story on a father who was awarded a Wyong Shire Council Sports Person of the Year Award for his voluntary work in setting up and running the Sports project.

Our experience of working in partnership with local residents through the Killarney Vale Bateau Bay Tumbi Umbi Community Building Network provides important clues on possibilities for engagement with the community in areas which have often been perceived as 'challenging' by those of us working in the community services sector (Castles 2004).

These possibilities for engagement and ultimately the enhancement of social capital are based not only on practice formed around assets-based community development, but also on the Michael Woolcock model of bonding, bridging and linking (cited in Hampshire and Smeaton 2001):

- Bonding — with family and close friends (many residents involved in the KBT Community Building Network already had strong bonds with family and immediate neighbours)
- Bridging — to a wider network within the community, an immediate reference group (new relationships have been formed, e.g. with a wider group of residents from across the suburbs)
- Linking — to institutions, businesses and government organisations such as the Department of Housing, local council, Neighbourhood and Youth Centre, and the Department of Sport and Recreation who work alongside residents in a relationship based on equality and respect.

San Remo/Blue Haven

The San Remo/Blue Haven area is in the northern part of Wyong Shire with a mix of older established areas and, particularly in Blue Haven, fast-growing areas of 'greenfields' development leading to relatively rapid increases in the population. There are growing numbers of Indigenous and culturally and linguistically diverse residents moving into the neighbourhood.

The role of The Benevolent Society has involved two workers acting as catalysts in the community building process with practice based both on assets-based community development and the bonding, bridging, linking model.

Two projects underway include working in partnership to develop leaders and action teams to facilitate new solutions, building on current ones and encouraging wider community participation, particularly in reference to Indigenous residents and those from a culturally and linguistically diverse background. The other project to be outlined is the San Remo Community Garden.

Indigenous Project

A range of culturally sensitive activities were developed in partnership with Indigenous residents of the area (some of whom already had strong intra-family and inter-family connections — bonding) including the formation of a local Aboriginal group which enabled families to come together through the medium of Aboriginal culture. Finding ways to share and pass on culture was seen to be a major vehicle for connecting families (bridging) and family support services, and community services — both government and non-government (linking).

A number of picnic gatherings were held where families connected, preschool children played together and parents shared parenting ideas. An Aboriginal group was formed and has received funding from the local council to enable it to hold a cultural event to mark NAIDOC week in July to bring families, support services and culture together (The Benevolent Society 2005 unpublished).

By identifying, respecting, providing encouragement and working in partnership with Indigenous residents to support the mobilisation of Aboriginal skills, knowledge and talents (assets) whilst acknowledging and developing the bonding, bridging, linking model of community engagement, the community worker has acted as a catalyst towards ongoing community building in the San Remo/Blue Haven area between the Aboriginal community and local services such as the Neighbourhood Centre — something which was not a feature of community life prior to the community building project being implemented.

Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Residents project

These residents themselves prefer to be called 'The International Community' as they believe this to be more inclusive so this is the term that will be used here.

Developing culturally appropriate ways to engage with the diverse international community was again the key to mobilisation. Two very successful family multicultural picnics were held, as this was the preferred type of community gathering identified by the international community (The Benevolent Society 2005 unpublished).

The group is now connected to the Neighbourhood Centre and will continue to seek funding to support a number of family picnics. Again, similar to the experience with the Indigenous

Project this positive relationship is a new facet of community life not so apparent before the community building project progressed.

Both the Indigenous and international component have enabled community leaders to emerge who are recognised by their respective communities and the wider community as leaders in their own right. The linking to community services provides opportunities for community-funded resources to potentially be shared with a broader spectrum of the San Remo/Blue Haven community, thus promoting in a real sense community inclusion and social justice.

The San Remo Community Garden

After an enthusiastic beginning in early 2003, the San Remo Community Garden Project had stalled by late 2003. Although this occurred for many reasons, one that can be identified is that the process had become trapped in a deficit model approach; too many barriers, not enough interest, too much in-fighting and limited community engagement experience.

The community worker from The Benevolent Society became involved at this time and was able to begin a process of mobilisation, which has now resulted in a development application being submitted to the local council which the Community Garden hope will result in approval for the garden to get started on the selected site. In the meantime, local residents have developed their horticultural and landscaping skills by undertaking an outreach course at the Neighbourhood Centre developed through a partnership with the Hunter Institute of Technology.

From a community development perspective community benefits of such a project include:

- Provides a social, caring place where people can meet, form friendships and work together (bridging)
- Play a positive role in relation to the mental and emotional health benefits brought about by the pleasure and satisfaction that being involved in the garden can engender
- Assist in the development of feelings of connection and belonging (social capital enhancement)
- Recognises and mobilises the assets in the community (a key feature of assets-based community development).

Conclusion

Assets-Based Community Development in Practice, sounds good but does it work? We say it does. The illustrations of community building using assets based community development and the bonding, bridging, linking model in two Central Coast communities give us clues to how and why it is an effective way of working.

The two example communities have a range of differences and similarities, however, by taking account of the practice clues possibilities are provided for application in other localities where community building is indicated as a fundamental component in improving the wellbeing of individuals, families, neighbourhoods and communities.

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