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**Abstract:** Governments in Australia are allocating resources to rural communities to increase their sustainable social, economic and environmental development. One of the projects funded for this purpose was 'The Gippsland Community Building Program', undertaken in three rural communities in Victoria in two stages from 2001-2004. A facilitator was appointed for each community project, and local government developed a model of governance in response to the characteristics and needs of the community. External evaluation of the program was undertaken in two stages over two years and consisted of a document audit, interviews and focus groups. Indicators used in the final evaluation to analyse the impact of each project on its community were 'citizen participation', 'community structure' and 'development instruments'. The governance structures were found to be particularly important, although results from each community project were also affected by the community's characteristics, the project design, and the role of the facilitator. Better project outcomes resulted from transparent governance structures, and consultation with and encouragement of the grassroots community to become actively involved and take responsibility for outcomes with assistance from the facilitator. Governance structures that encouraged inclusive local grassroots ownership of projects were associated with successful community building programs. Community capacity is the interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of that community. It may operate through informal social processes and/or organized efforts by individuals, organizations, and social networks that exist among them and between them and the larger systems of which the community is a part (Chaskin 2001).

# **Grassroots community engagement: The key to success in a community building program**

*Peter O'Meara, Cathy Pendergast & Anske Robinson*

## **Abstract**

*Governments in Australia are allocating resources to rural communities to increase their sustainable social, economic and environmental development. One of the projects funded for this purpose was 'The Gippsland Community Building Program', undertaken in three rural communities in Victoria in two stages from 2001-2004. A facilitator was appointed for each community project, and local government developed a model of governance in response to the characteristics and needs of the community.*

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*The governance structures were found to be particularly important, although results from each community project were also affected by the community's characteristics, the project design, and the role of the facilitator. Better project outcomes resulted from transparent governance structures, and consultation with and encouragement of the grassroots community to become actively involved and take responsibility for outcomes with assistance from the facilitator.*

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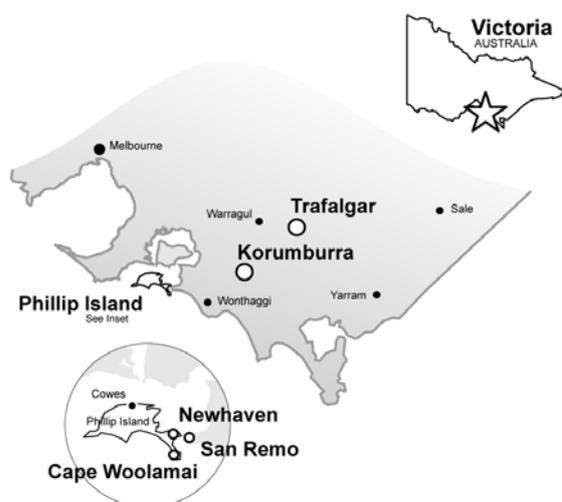
*Community capacity is the interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and social capital existing within a given community that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and improve or maintain the well-being of that community. It may operate through informal social processes and/or organized efforts by individuals, organizations, and social networks that exist among them and between them and the larger systems of which the community is a part.(Chaskin, 2001)*

## **Introduction**

The social, economic and environmental sustainability of communities has become an important political issue for governments throughout Australia. As a result considerable effort and resources have been expended to strengthen the fabric of small rural communities and in some cases disadvantaged areas of larger cities. This evaluation study uses the experiences of three rural communities to highlight the importance of grassroots community engagement in successful community building. The lessons learnt here may have application to other similar communities participating in government sponsored community building exercises.

Between 2001 and 2004, the Gippsland Community Building Program was implemented in the communities of Trafalgar, Korumburra and the neighbouring communities of San Remo, Newhaven and Cape Woolamai, the latter identified hereafter as '3925', based on their shared postcode. A facilitator was appointed for each community project and the local municipalities developed models of governance in response to the characteristics and needs of each community. Figure 1 locates the three communities within the Gippsland region of Victoria.

**Figure 1: Gippsland Community Building Program**



Each of these three communities has a distinct identity that influenced the success of the community building program. Trafalgar is a community that sees the need to move ahead and develop. It is a united community and has substantial growth occurring in the size of the township. Korumburra too is growing with many people having moved to the area over recent years, but it still has a solid core of people who are content with their life, who have no interest in development occurring within the town. It also has a group of disadvantaged people that require support networks. The 3925 community is changing very quickly from a settled community based on the fishing industry and farming to one that has many retired people. It also has a large proportion of part-time residents with holiday homes in this area.

Each of the capacity building projects had different governance structures and the related role of the facilitator varied in the three communities. The *Korumburra* project employed a particularly successful model for conducting the project. The local Council became the legal entity which provided the project with authority and support, while ownership and the direction of the project were under the control of the community and the project team through the Korumburra Community Development and Action Inc. (KCDA). The facilitator's role was that of a skilled resource person, providing information and support. The *Trafalgar* project participants also worked well together, despite there being changes made in the direction of the project after it commenced due to funding changes. There was also some tension between the local Council and the project committee as they established the ownership and direction of the project activities. The 3925 project had many difficulties in negotiating issues of

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ownership and clarity of structure, and struggled with governance issues throughout the project.

## Methods

The program was evaluated over a 12-month period at the end of Stages 1 and 2 of each of the projects using focus groups, documentary analysis, plus an interview with one key person who was not available at the time of the focus groups.

Data collection was undertaken for each project using the following procedure:

1. Each community program was scoped with their objectives, structure, processes and expected outcomes examined. Following this, survey and focus group materials were prepared and ethics approval obtained from Monash University.
2. The available project records, such as annual reports, minutes of meetings, project reports, position descriptions, newspaper articles, and the newsletters produced as outcomes of the project were audited.
3. Focus groups were conducted with each of the community project groups, with the project facilitators, and with the Community Development Officers from each Council. Random groups of community members also participated in a focus group in each community.
4. One of the facilitators was interviewed in place of participation in a focus group, due to her short tenure with the project at that stage

Three broad factors were used as indicators of the impact of the project on each community: 'citizen participation', 'community structure' and 'development instruments'.(McGuire, 1994) Sub-categories identified from within each of these three groups are as follows:

### Citizen participation

- acceptance of change
- acceptance of community strengths and weakness
- effective mechanisms for direct community input

### Community structure

- dispersed leadership roles
- vertical linkages through seeking external resources from the state and federal governments
- shared vision or direction, project-oriented involvement, and lead agency

### Development instruments

- community spirit activities
- infrastructure, appropriate development focus
- major business development

### Project Outcomes

In Stage 1 of the Gippsland Community Building Program (GCBP) a variety of initiatives were carried out to build community capacity. These initiatives were instrumental in increasing and affirming individual skills and abilities, and improving each community's capacity to become proactive in their community work. This early phase of the program involved each of the project communities establishing a

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Community Action Team (CAT) along the lines of local action teams used in community building projects in the United Kingdom from the early 1970s.(Marinetto, 2003) These teams identified a number of specific local projects and developed associated action plans. The three project groups collaborated to organise skills development workshops, community building town visits and a combined residential youth leadership program. They also took part in a shared community celebration. Based on the recommendations from the evaluation of Stage 1, the three Councils all successfully obtained funding to renew the capacity building program in each community.

Stage 2 of the GCBP sought to build on these initiatives with an emphasis on increasing participation in community activities, building the capacity of the community to manage and direct these activities, and to further develop their local networks. In each community, a facilitator was employed to enable the program aims to be achieved.

A tangible outcome of project activities in all three communities was the production of popular newsletters and newspapers of varying technical quality. Other outcomes included activities such as the development of an Access Centre in Korumburra, a successful grant application for renovations to the Scout Hall in Trafalgar, and the garden festival in the 3925 community which was initiated and planned by the 3925 project team, although implemented through the employment of a Council project officer. Not all the initiatives that the communities implemented were successful in developing community capacity. This experience is not unique to these three Gippsland communities. 'Leaders have learned that it takes time, persistence, and often many failures before this vision of 'bottom up' leadership can be developed.'(Kaye, 2001) Two of the main issues to emerge from the evaluations of each community project for further discussion and reflection were the related issues of governance and facilitation.

While the *Korumburra* community is diverse, the governance of the project was designed around specific outcomes and the role of the facilitator was to provide knowledge and information to support the project team and the community to achieve these outcomes. Governance structures were clear and all parties to the project worked cohesively. Although not all the project outcomes were achieved due to the timeframe, the project had many successes.

The *Trafalgar* community is a dynamic and cohesive community, comprising many people with strong management and community action skills. They demonstrated a shared vision of the way in which their community was developing and were established as the key stakeholders in this process. They saw the project facilitator as their employee with the role of supporting the project team and the community. The facilitator was expected to be an active enabler, both doing some of the necessary tasks himself and also providing skills development to other community members. Trafalgar showed many of the characteristics of a learning community, such as having a vision for the community, a diversity of leadership, and an open process.(Moore, 2000; O'Meara, 2004) In the early stages of the project, the governance structures had not been fully developed and there was some conflict between the Council and project group with regards to ownership and direction of the project.

As a more diverse community consisting of several sub-communities with varying aims and objectives, the 3925 project had difficulty achieving their project outcomes.

The design of the project included many objectives that were difficult to achieve in the time frame and there was dissension over the roles of the facilitator and the other project parties. The governance structure was not clearly understood or accepted and there was a significant lack of trust between community members and the local Council, much of it based on past events associated with forced local government amalgamations. Similar antagonism between community groups and government agencies when embarking on local partnerships arrangements have been noted in New Zealand. (Larner, 2004) These difficulties resulted in Stage 2 of the project being suspended after fourteen months and a change in facilitator taking place. Although there were some good outcomes as a result of this project, it encountered many difficulties and the experience for many community members was reported as being extremely negative.

As already indicated the evaluation of Stage 2 of the programs used three broad factors as indicators of their impact on community capacity building. These were 'citizen participation', 'community structure' and 'development instruments'. The goals of a community building projects included visible outcomes such as festivals, infrastructure and other community events. Less tangible goals such as the enhancement of skills to lead and transform the community are arguably more valid outcomes, although not as easily measured in the short term. (Moore, 2000)

#### **Governance and facilitation**

The aim with community building projects is to empower communities to take ownership of community development within a structured framework with support from their local Councils and professional facilitators. Three key elements have been described that must be in place to mobilize community involvement. (Kaye, 2001) 'The grassroots community must be involved in defining the issues; the grassroots community must be involved in defining solutions and strategies; and the grassroots community must know that it will be given tools and resources to control the implementation of programs and strategies.' (Kaye, 2001) Community building projects should not be seen as the imposition of directions from the organising body. The principle underpinning these types of projects is that through local involvement and ownership of the planning and implementation processes, community capacity is automatically increased.

Critics argue that the outcomes of government-funded community building in Australia are likely to be modest and most probably temporary in nature due to a lack of understanding of the complexity of the theory and practice of community building. (Murphy, 2004) The evaluation of governance and the facilitation role in these communities provides an insight into the enablement of grassroots development and investigates just how important these ingredients are to successful community capacity building.

The *Korumburra* project appeared to be particularly successful in providing a governance structure that gave ownership to the community yet provided a framework that was supportive and enabling. The *Trafalgar* project was very enabling in the sense that the community identified clear objectives and consistently drove the direction of community activities and the governance framework instigated for the project was supportive. However, there was some dissension at the beginning of the project about who had the authority to direct the facilitator and to whom the facilitator was accountable. The enabling of grassroots development within the 3925 community

was very unsuccessful, with the community lacking the cohesion to take ownership of the project within the program structure. Problems manifested themselves when the first facilitator reportedly lacked the necessary skills for the role and the Council attempted to become more directive through the facilitators, rather than involving the community in defining their own solutions and strategies.

The role of the facilitator is closely related to governance and is central to the capacity building process and outcomes. There appears to be an expectation that facilitators are not only required to exercise new forms of leaderships and management skills, they are also expected to introduce new cultures of working and learning into their institutions or communities. The demand that the traditional technical and organisational skills combined with the networking and relationship building skills will be embodied in the same person may be an unrealistic expectation.(Larner, 2004)

The facilitation role adopted in the *Korumburra* project was one of a guide, who brought together knowledge and resources. The *Trafalgar* project developed a facilitation role with a mixture of 'hands on' and enabling skills. Within the 3925 project the second facilitator also had a mixture of 'hands on' and enabling styles, which were thought to be required for the project due to the earlier difficulties.

It is particularly important that the overseeing body and the project team have a shared vision for the role of the facilitator, determining whether this should predominantly be one of a guide, enabling access to resources, networking, liaising, and developing skills, or whether a more active 'hands-on' approach is wanted, with a much more visible leadership role being utilised. One of the essential features of any program or project to build capacity in communities is to tailor measures to make them appropriate for the specific community.(Howe, 2001) There is a strong view that facilitation is most effective when 'the emphasis is on giving people the skills to do things for themselves', but they may also help by 'nudging the project teams along'.(I & J Management 2002)

### **Korumburra**

The role of the facilitator was implemented with particular success in Korumburra and it was evident that governance issues between the facilitator, local community (KCDA) and the Council were addressed satisfactorily, enabling all parties within the project to work together within a cohesive and supportive framework. The Council and KCDA discussed the employment of the facilitator and authority for the project at its commencement and a clear distinction was made between the employer role and the authority for the project.

*We had a choice about whether we employed [the facilitator] directly, or the Shire ... we talked about it and made a very deliberate decision that we didn't want to employ him and that was so the Shire could do ... the payroll and work cover. (KCDA member).*

While the Council was responsible for employing the facilitator and providing support on relevant issues, the KCDA had authority over the direction of the facilitator's work and was given the freedom to work with the facilitator according to its needs. The Council consolidated the KCDA's ownership of the project through their involvement in the recruitment of the facilitator.

The governance arrangements did create some minor disadvantages for the facilitator. There was at times 'not quite a feeling of belonging' because employment was not

through the community group and the location of the office in a room in a building known simply as the 'meeting room' in the Korumburra community meant that the facilitator was 'not as linked in as I could have been'. More communication with the Council would also have been preferred, but nevertheless relationships with the Council as the employer were positive, and the facilitator could 'drop in and have a cuppa with the employers.'

The facilitator became a resource for network strengthening in the community, and skill development amongst the KCDA, including those necessary for publication of the community newsletter. '[The facilitator] gave us the confidence, the skills that we didn't have, we just didn't know how to start, where to begin and how to liaise with Shire organisations or government organisation or any of the other things that need to happen.' This resource is important when volunteers do not always have the time and skills needed to take on projects that have been identified by a community as desirable.

### **Trafalgar**

The key lessons to be learned from the *Trafalgar* experience relate to the clarity of the project structure, including the importance of having an agreed position on the role of the facilitator as part of the governance structure. The TCDA and Council did not initially have a well-defined and agreed upon view of who would have authority as the governing body for the project. This became evident in the early stages, when there was some confusion about the direction the project should be taking. This was due to a lack of agreement on a strategic plan when the Council funded a consultant to 'help the community with its strategic planning'.

While the facilitator worked closely with the TCDA in implementing the project, his employment was through the Council and the facilitation role was rather unclear and inconsistent. As one respondent said, 'The facilitator didn't know what the TCDA wanted, and the TCDA didn't know what the Council wanted'. This highlighted the lack of clarity about which organisation had ownership of the project. Highlighting this dilemma were the following statements. 'It was hard [to see] where the direction came from. Is it the TCDA, is it the Council?' Another interviewee noted that, 'he kind of struggled in that he had a few different masters.'

There was also some comment on whether the role of the facilitator was to delegate and enable, or to be 'hands on'. However, the dynamic 'hands-on' approach of the facilitator, in addition to his networking and facilitation skills, was a style that appears to have worked well. TCDA respondents reported that with the facilitator's assistance, 'it was a real success story.' The networking skills of the facilitator brought committees together 'to discuss fund raising and ideas for fund raising, and brought them together for ideas and discussion.' In commenting on his style of what a TCDA member termed 'boots and all - hands in' and 'entrepreneurial', the facilitator observed that the time frame was too short and that he 'took project ideals to show what could be done.' He felt that one of his key roles within this very short timeframe was 'getting the community groups to [develop] skills.' This was achieved through the development of Community Information and Skill-building Kits, networking, resourcing of committees with grant funding information, and skills development in the production of the newspaper and the 'Battle of Trafalgar' festival. This approach

of encouraging early victories, is consistent with reports of successful community building programs in the United States of America.(Moore, 2000)

3925

In the 3925 community, there were two different styles of facilitation throughout the project. This is a reflection that the three parties, the community action team (CAT), Council and the facilitators, that had differing perspectives on their ownership of the project and their respective responsibilities to provide leadership and direction. There were a number of serious governance issues that contributed to the difficulties encountered in 3925.

The CAT felt it was the facilitator's role to support the grass-roots community and not impose ideas from the Council. They felt that the Council had taken too much ownership of the project and reported that, when introduced to the first facilitator in the second stage of the project, they were informed that 'now [as] a Council employee, this is the way we are going to run things'. From the project team members' perspective, the Council's control and leadership of meetings demonstrated a lack of understanding of grassroots community development principles. (Murphy, 2004) Adding to this perception of a top-down approach, may have been comments from the second facilitator that initiatives, such as the funding for a picnic shelter, were not in the facilitator's brief from the Council.

The 3925 community is relatively fragmented and the project group was not consistent in its membership throughout the life of the project. It therefore had difficulty representing the wider community and determining a shared vision for the project. It seems that the Council encouraged the facilitators to take a more directive role in this situation and to also broaden their brief to include working with the community as a whole, rather than just the project team.

The Council acknowledged that with hindsight, they should have supported the facilitators more from the beginning of the project. However, in Stage 2 there was a confusing duality of authority as the project team had been involved in recruiting the facilitator although they were not the employing or supervisory body. During the final stage of the project, Council directed the facilitator to concentrate her efforts toward developing a community centre that had recently been separately funded. The rationale for this was to 'improve the Council's links with the community and change the 'them and us' attitude'.

Due to the ongoing conflict, changing membership and eventual demise of the project team and associated groups, the facilitators tended to focus on organising continuing and new activities, offering these as a means of gradually drawing the community in and eventually increasing their sense of ownership. The second facilitator was aware that due to the short time frame of employment, the task of community building would barely begin in the time that was left and hoped there would be scope to continue after this stage of the project was complete.

There was general agreement that any facilitator in 3925 would have needed to be particularly skilled in working constructively to bring a range people together with markedly different viewpoints and characteristics. As already noted, community facilitators require skills to undertake a wide range of complex tasks and may not necessarily have a sound local knowledge of the community in which they work. (Murphy, 2004) In view of these challenges, the second facilitator found it beneficial to work with one of the Council development officers as a professional peer. In this project there was inadequate attention paid to clarifying a structural framework within which the project could develop constructively. Meeting and

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documentation processes, the unrealistically large scope of the project, misunderstandings about the management structure by people associated with the project and also an inadequately defined role for the facilitator all created difficulties.

The *Korumburra* project appeared to be particularly successful in providing a structure that gave ownership to the community yet provided a framework that was supportive and enabling. While the *Trafalgar* project was very enabling in that the community identified clear objectives and consistently drove the direction of community activities and the Council framework instigated for the project was supportive, there was some dissention at the beginning of the project about the authority to direct the facilitator and to whom the facilitator was accountable. The enabling of grassroots development within the 3925 community was very unsuccessful, with the community lacking the cohesion to take ownership of the project within the program structure.

It is particularly important that the overseeing body and the project team have a shared vision for the role of the facilitator, determining whether this should predominantly be one of a guide, enabling access to resources, networking, liaising, and developing skills, or whether a more active 'hands-on' approach is wanted, with a much more visible leadership role being utilised. One of the essential features of any program or project to build capacity in communities is to tailor measures to make them appropriate for the specific area the program is applied to.(Howe, 2001)

### Conclusion

On reflection, the evaluation found that the existing capacity of rural communities is one of the important factors when consideration is given to the suitability of communities for community building. Community building programs should be tailored to the circumstances of each community, working relationships need to be negotiated in a transparent manner, and facilitation is best used to transfer skills to participants through a range of engagement strategies.

It is clear that it is unfair and unrealistic to expect communities with very little existing community cohesion to rise to the challenge of building significant capacity without special consideration of their unique challenges. This is particularly relevant in rural and remote areas where there is limited capacity to import expertise into the community. Funding such communities without consideration of these issues runs the risk of damaging them and reducing their future community building capacity. This is an important ethical issue for funding bodies and researchers alike to consider before embarking on what may seem an altruistic endeavour.

It is crucial that there is negotiation of a collaborative working relationship that addresses tensions that may exist between key players in the project. This supports the view that success is more likely when governance issues are successfully negotiated, with the funding body providing 'strong, dedicated staff, and additional resources, [but playing] a relatively unobtrusive role in collaborative deliberations.'(Chaskin, 2001) Formalized process and procedures that clarify the roles and responsibilities and provide clear guidelines are also needed to implement this vision.(Foster-Fishman, 2001) One key strategy is the provision of clear information about project goals and strategies throughout the community.

Communities that enter into community building programs may need skilled guidance from facilitators to help them determine a realistic scope for their ambitions. It is

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particularly important that the overseeing body and the community members have a shared vision for the facilitation role. Once engaged facilitators need to use a number of engagement strategies for an inclusive and diverse local grassroots ownership in order to encourage and strengthen capacity building in community building projects. Facilitation appears to be most effective when the emphasis is on giving people the skills to do things for themselves, while it may also be helpful to nudge the project teams along. (I & J Management 2002) Community building programs also need to be offered timeframes that are based on a sustainable increase in community capacity, rather than short term outcomes prioritised due to the pressure to produce any outcome within arbitrary deadlines. (O'Meara, 2004)

In the Gippsland Community Builders program, it was the establishment of a coherent and transparent governance framework that provided an essential foundation for each of the successful programs. Governance issues are one of the more vital ingredients in the mix of influencers for community building projects, and must be prioritised for action in a skilled, structured and timely manner. It is vital for all parties at the onset of a project that they clearly understand the shape and character of the balance of power and responsibilities between the community, councils and paid project facilitators. The three rural communities studied here illustrate that while positive outcomes cannot be guaranteed in community building projects with strong governance frameworks those without them are likely to struggle to succeed in sustaining community engagement or to increase their community capacity.

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