

Community Capacity Building: An overview of key themes and issues

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Capacity Building is now a central tenet of most work undertaken in community and informs the social policy discussion across all levels and sectors of government. However, there is a lack of clarity about what community capacity means and how one builds capacity. The aim of this article is to sketch some of the key ideas and issues around capacity building and to consider capacity building in action.

What is community capacity building?

In the last 15 years, interest in community capacity building has been proliferating, informed by many streams of writing in the fields of community work, environment, community development, health and community planning. These discussions have run parallel to those around social capital, healthy communities, rebuilding civil society, community engagement, deliberative democracy and active citizenship (see Creyton, 2004b).

Chaskin (in Sustainable Communities Network, 2003a: 6) provides one of the clearer definitions of community capacity as: "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 a given community. It may operate through informal social processes and/or organized effort"

In a key text "Building Communities from the Inside Out", Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) argue that in response to community problems, there is a focus traditionally on the problems and needs of the community rather than on the capacity of the community to solve those problems. This leads to a costly service-oriented environment, creating clients out of citizens and setting up a self-fulfilling prophecy of social exclusion and client neighbourhoods. Kretzmann and McKnight's (1993) approach is to identify the assets of a community in the form of individuals, associations and institutions, and then regenerate this community through developing these capacities "into new combinations, new structures of opportunity, new sources of income and control and new possibilities for production" (p.6).

There is a variety of definitions of what community capacity building may mean in practice. A few examples are provided below:

- "The building of sustainable skills, structures, resources and commitment " (Hawe et al 1999)
- "Development work that strengthens the ability of community organisations and groups to build their structures, systems, people and skills so that they are better able to define and achieve their objectives." (Skinner, 1997)
- "Strengthening peoples' capacity to determine their own values and priorities and to act on these, is the basis of development. Capacity building is an approach to development rather than a set of discrete or pre-packaged interventions" (Eade in Fitzgerald, 2000: 1); and
- "highly effective capacity building is ... about creating an environment that encourages and supports continuous learning and improvement in individuals, organisations, networks and eventually the communities and societies they seek to change" (Newman 2001: 1).

Hawe et al (2000) have suggested that capacity building in the field of health refers to at least 3 very different activities:

- Building infra-structure (to deliver programs);
- Building partnerships and organisational environments (to help sustain programs and gains or positive outcomes); and
- Building problem solving capacity in communities and systems (to ensure appropriate responses to new problems in unfamiliar contexts).

Social capital and capacity building

One concept that has been linked consistently with capacity is social capital. "Social capital refers to the processes between people which establish networks, norms and social trust" (Cox, 1995: 15). High social capital is essential for effective communities as it encourages participation, linkages between people, proactive engagement and community problem solving (see Bullen and Onyx, 1999).

Three types of social capital are:

- **Bonding** – represents strong or intimate social connections which are based on similar interests and values, and may include close family and friends as well as formal and informal networks of like-minded individuals;
- **Bridging** – represents relationships between people who may have different values and ways of being, This type of social capital emphasises less intimate connections which may develop through our workplaces, neighbourhood initiatives and through the links between different groups and communities; and
- **Linking** – which refers to connecting with groups with formal power such as government, business and the non-government organisations. (see Healy and Hampshire 2004).

Effective capacity building works with, develops and increases, social capital.

Is capacity building a new name for community development?

For some, capacity building is simply a new name for community development. For others, capacity building is a new approach with far greater emphasis on engaging all segments of the community including business and government, a focus on place management rather than program focused management and the inclusion of market based solutions to neighbourhood regeneration (Hounslow, 2002).

One useful way of framing these differences is suggested by Healy (2001). She suggests two practice approaches to developing social capital and these are communitarian and synergistic. The communitarian approach focuses on local associations, community groups with a particular focus on the social assets of the poor. This reflects a more traditional community development approach. The synergistic approach focuses on community networks and partnerships between all segments of the community, with a policy focus on participation and linkages. This reflects a more capacity building focus.

Key elements of community capacity building

Throughout the literature there are some common key elements of a community capacity building approach and these include:

1. Asset focus

Capacity Building identifies and builds on the assets and strengths within the community. Each segment of the community from families, businesses, governments, schools, faith based institutions, associations and organisations have various commitments, skills and resources to contribute to capacity building and in partnership each gains in capacity (Mayer, 2002).

Easterling et al (in Sustainable Communities Network, SCN, 2003: 6) note that these assets:

- a) need to increase quality of life for the whole of community;
- b) already exist within the community rather than be imported in by experts; and
- c) while they may reside with individual members, it is the synergistic effect of the assets combined.

2. Relationships and networks

Capacity Building is relationship driven. It utilises, builds and extends on networks, partnerships and alliances. This includes valuing and supporting informal networks and the variety of relationships already existing within communities as well as acknowledging the importance of relational leadership.

Networks provide opportunities to:

- access resources, skills and knowledges in different sectors and organizations;
- engage greater numbers of community and extend resources;
- build social capital and accompanying levels of trust and cooperation
- create an identity and shared values across the community; and
- build alliances to seek change and access power outside our existing networks and community

3. Local nature of initiatives

A focus on assets and strengths within communities, which are driven and fostered by relationships and networks, requires a strong internal focus "stressing the primacy of local definition, investment, creativity hope and control" (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993:: 5). Capacity building emphasises local, bottom-up initiatives which are embedded in the community. "Capacity building should supplement and support existing initiatives rather than take over from other community development processes" (SCN, 2003: 19).

Local issues require local knowledges, leaders and management. To be sustainable it must be community driven.

4. Community empowerment and engagement

Capacity building goes beyond community consultation and involvement. Community empowerment may include development of shared vision and recognition of shared history; large scale community involvement; and community ownership, direction setting and decision making. A key outcome of these processes is a greater sense of connectedness across the community.

Capacity building efforts rely on active citizens, local leaders and community engagement. The Regional Women's Advisory Council (2002) found that a critical factor in the future success of rural and regional communities was community engagement. As people engage they generate positive feelings about their communities, their engagement leads to actual successes which further promote more engagement.

Community engagement has a triple positive effect. Firstly there is the value of the contribution to the individual contributor (health and personal esteem benefits). Secondly there are benefits to the individual and/or community receiving this assistance. Thirdly, through contributing people encourage others to participate through modeling and building a culture of participation (Bowen, 2001).

It requires key stakeholders, such as government, to assist in facilitating and resourcing this process so that government is not working from a top down approach, but operating in partnership with civil society (see Cavaye, 2000).

Governments must seek to engage with communities and to be willing to change processes, priorities and structures in response to that engagement (Hashagen, 2002).

5. Inclusion

Inclusion is a key principle in much of the capacity building thinking. By engaging all groups, including those who have been marginalised, we can:

- identify a range of assets previously not recognised or valued;
- gain greater participation which can lead to better solutions and outcomes; and
- avoid social isolation and disconnection, fostering greater social capital and cohesion (Bush, Mutch and Dower, 2001; Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993).

To be inclusive it is necessary to engage with formal and informal leaders and groups, representing geographic communities but also communities of interest and communities of identity. Capacity builders need to utilise a variety of processes which identify and engage with groups who are traditionally marginalised, silenced and/or excluded. A key challenge is the process of inclusion which values and ensures diversity and difference (Hashagen, 2002)

6. Sustainability

Many of the previous themes link to the idea of sustainable communities. While what makes a community sustainable will be unique to each community, there are three commonly recognised components which need to be considered together. These are:

- a healthy and diverse ecosystem which supports healthy living and renewable resources;
- an equitable social system which respects diversity and encourages community connectedness and well-being; and
- a healthy and diverse economy which is financially viable over the long term (SCN, 2003: 10-12).

Capacity building that incorporates these elements is multifaceted and takes a holistic approach to issues. It utilises strategies which make a long term difference and works with and develops local knowledges and local resources, seeking to embed effective community problem solving and community action within the local setting.

Community capacity building in practice

A review of the capacity building literature indicates that while there is a significant amount of discussion on this topic, there is little research or discussion around the practical implementation of these approaches. A critical understanding of building capacity maintains that one approach does not suit all situations. While capacity building values flexibility, local solutions and innovation, there are some key approaches which are highly valued. Four of these approaches to capacity building in action are presented here:

- (A) Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) propose a five stage process to capacity building:
1. Mapping community assets including those of individuals, associations and local institutions as well as the community's physical assets and those who can most effectively find and build capacity at a local level;
 2. Building relationships among these community assets, exploring additional ways these assets can be utilised and opportunities which open up through collaboration
 3. Mobilising these assets for economic development and information sharing. Focus is on what local initiatives can the community build on and what can it potentially export;
 4. Convening the community to develop a vision and a plan. Such a process involves three commitments in the planning process:
 - i. begin with assets;
 - ii. expand the table to invite those outside the traditional leadership; and
 - iii. combine planning with problem solving to keep its focus in the reality of everyday life;
 5. Leveraging outside resources to support locally driven development.
- (B) Garlick in McGinty (2002) writing from an Australian perspective suggests five elements of effective capacity building:
1. Knowledge building through enhancing skills, and fostering a learning community;
 2. Leadership building through developing shared directions and taking a key influence in what happens in the region;
 3. Network building through partnerships and alliances;
 4. Valuing community and the importance of place and local initiatives; and
 5. Providing supporting information through capturing and utilising quality information.
- (C) Howe and Cleary (in Hounslow, 2002) suggest five key factors of success in considering community capacity building initiatives in Victoria :
1. capacity building focusing on education and the development of human and social capital;
 2. a linked approach involving three sectors of government, business and community;
 3. emphasis on local democracy with bottom up initiatives and local focus and leadership;
 4. flexible approaches; and
 5. sustainable strategies rather than one-off projects.
- (C) In Volunteering Qld's project with Brisbane City Council's community environmental groups, we have identified seven key mechanisms of capacity building across this informal sector:

- Enhancing Leadership;
- Strengths-based Strategic Planning;
- Supporting and Resourcing Catalyst Figures;
- Education programs;
- Mentoring;
- Participation, Recruitment & Group Function; and
- Community Engagement & Networking.

(A more detailed model of what each stage contains is attached as Appendix 1)

The next part of the paper considers some of the key concepts relating to capacity building in organisations.

Key elements of organisational capacity building

There is a range of work around organisational capacity building, which supplements the community capacity building approaches and literature.

The focus of organisational capacity building efforts in the community and voluntary sector has been on large non-profit organisations.

Concepts which are central to the organisational capacity building literature include:

- There are no quick fixes; capacity building is an ongoing effort and resource intensive;
- One size does not fit all; each organisation requires a unique set of approaches which reflects culture, processes and ways of working;
- Technical approaches are only part of capacity building; more central is the development of people, culture, relationships and processes;
- Capacity building is an approach which focuses on strengths and opportunities rather than a deficit model of working;
- Central to any capacity building conversation is the need to refocus on purpose and mission of the group or organisation;
- Capacity building needs to be strategic and have a clear focus; and
- Capacity building is only successful when driven by the organisation; the consultant can only facilitate and provide expertise.

(see DeVita et al, 2001; McKinsey and Co, 2001; Newman 2001)

Key challenges and tensions

Capacity building appears to offer a very positive paradigm for our work within communities; however there are several key challenges and tensions in working with such an approach.

Firstly capacity building is offered sometimes as a universal panacea to the issues which confront our communities. A quick search of the literature indicates it can revitalise traditional family structures, radicalise democracy, encourage corporate philanthropy, promote individual business enterprise, end social isolation, eliminate the tensions of a pluralist society and reduce greenhouse emission. Terms such as capacity building can be used to avoid the more difficult questions around the tension between individual and community interests, the role of government in adequately resourcing services, the conflicting interests of different social groups and the role of political action (Foley and Edward, 1997; Hefner, 1998; Seligman, 1993). In political discourses these concepts are often simplified. What is often concealed is the importance of power and the challenging realities of inequality and how these tensions impact on the competing need for resources. (See Creyton 2004c for a further discussion of these issues.)

Secondly the strong focus on local approaches and initiatives may fail to acknowledge that sometimes there are not local solutions, and that non-local factors such as social structures or institutions may be the critical factor. Furthermore we cannot assume that local communities are homogeneous or community leaders are representative of the whole community. There is also a negative side to strong local networks which may be exclusionary and inward looking (see Cox, 1995; Healy and Hampshire, 2004; Hounslow, 2002).

Thirdly there are some key challenges to capacity building in the way many organisations have traditionally worked in and with communities. There is strong valuing of direct service delivery work both by community organisations and the donors who support them. Fitzgerald (2000b) fears community service organisations are primarily concerned with service transactions and not with the long term development of the community and the clients. This is often heightened by funding arrangements and competitive pressures. Our own paradigms may stop us seeing alternative approaches. For instance, Healy and Hampshire (2004) note that some community groups see corporates as donors primarily, and do not explore more partnership approaches or more engaging alternatives.

Finally capacity building must not be used as a way of avoiding addressing social injustices and inequities. Taylor (2003) notes before capacity building in indigenous communities can take hold we must address the fundamentals of indigenous health and ensuring participation in the broader society. There is a danger that the responsibility for addressing all social issues is handed over to the community and government withdraws from its responsibilities.

Conclusion

The capacity building discussion has reenergised many people working in and with communities. It offers an approach which is holistic, community based and empowering. It needs more documented practical examples of success and greater exploration of some of the critical issues. This is a key role for practitioners as well as researchers and academics.

References

Appendix One Key Mechanisms and Strategies for Sustainable Capacity Building of Community-based Environmental Groups within the Brisbane Program Habitat (see attached)



