

Enhancing the Capacity of Grassroots Groups to Engage: Practical Initiatives From a Community/Local Government Partnership

Creyton M^{1*}, See M² & Bourke P³

¹ Manager Education and Research, Volunteering Queensland, Australia

² Environment & Parks Branch, Brisbane City Council

³ Water Resources Branch, Brisbane City Council

Abstract

Grassroots organisations play an invaluable role in the community working hand-in-hand with local government. These groups connect and engage citizens at a local level, providing community input and strategic advice, contributing their skills, experience and influence in the care of community assets and resources. This paper will consider practical grassroots capacity building delivered through an innovative partnership between Volunteering Queensland and Brisbane City Council's (BCCs) catchment and bushcare programs. The partners set out to develop specific initiatives to assist groups at a grassroots level, which have resulted in three programs targeting three audiences: community leaders, the grassroots organisations and the local community volunteers.

Since 2001, the Community Peer Leadership Program has provided leadership development for voluntary leaders across a broad range of community sectors. This six month program provides both broad community education and technical skills development. It has been successful in enhancing both individual skills and knowledges, and building both organisational capacity and fostering local community networks.

Over the past two years further programs have been developed, which focus specifically on natural resource management and local bushcare programs. The Catchment Group Strategic Capacity Building Project has focussed on building the work of catchment groups throughout Brisbane by providing an intensive capacity audit with catchment groups followed by development work tailored to groups' needs. The Capacity Building Initiative focuses on facilitating conversations between local bushcare and catchment groups, which assists in building regional Capacity Action Plans with the aim to enhance knowledge sharing, networking and coordinated strategic action.

The paper will consider what are the critical areas for grassroots capacity building; the rationale, impact and outcomes of different approaches and what have been the common themes, opportunities and challenges in strategically assisting groups to further build capacity.

Keywords

Grassroots associations, capacity building, local government, volunteering, natural resource management

Introduction

There has been much discussion over the importance of capacity building and community engagement in local communities over the past fifteen years. However, little attention has been given to the role of grassroots associations (GAs) in these processes (Creyton 2004). Grassroots associations are those “locally based and basically autonomous, volunteer-run, non-profit groups that have an official membership of volunteers” (Smith 1997a, p. 269). These organisations may be incorporated or not, may employ a part-time or full-time staff worker, but primarily the work of the organisation is managed and performed by the volunteers.

Traditionally there have been two approaches in the research literature about GAs. The first is to ignore these groups completely in what David Horton Smith (1997b) has described as the “Flat Earth Maps of non-profit Sector”. The discussion is focussed solely on non-profit organisations that employ staff and the volunteers are involved through formal volunteer programs. The second type of research recognises these informal groups but assumes that the same concepts of effectiveness and viability apply to these groups as apply to large non-profit organisations (Smith and Shen 1996).

Consideration of these groups is tremendously important in any understanding of the power of civil society and community building. Central to community capacity building are the informal processes and collective efforts of grass roots associations, social movements, self-help groups and local action collectives. The significance of GAs is supported by the research, which showed that in 1996 Australia had around 700,000 civil society organisations of which only 34,000 employed staff (Lyons 2001). More recent research has identified that in Queensland, four out of five incorporated associations have less than \$50,000 in funding a year and less than 100 members (McGregor-Lowndes 2005).

Grassroots organisations play an invaluable role in working hand in hand with local government. These groups connect and engage citizens at a local level, providing community input and strategic advice, contributing their skills, experience and influence in the care of community

assets and resources. The relationships between GAs and formal organisations (such as local government and businesses) have a significant influence on building the level of agency and opening up opportunities for capacity building (Agrawal and Gibson 2001). Furthermore, flow-on effects have the potential to build capacity to inspire and generate mutually beneficial processes for organisations at local, state and in some cases national levels.

There is growing recognition of the different processes and capacities of informal and formal organisations, along with the different benefits they can provide to the wider community (Creyton 2003; Klausen 1995).

Volunteering Queensland and Brisbane City Council's catchment and bushcare programs have been working together on a range of initiatives that are directly aimed at enhancing and supporting the work of GAs. The work has been informed by some key understandings of capacity building.

Key principles and mechanisms for building the capacity of GAs

Six key principles underpin the capacity building efforts:

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).

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.

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, p. 5). Capacity building emphasises local, bottom-up initiatives that are embedded in the community. "Capacity building should supplement and support existing initiatives rather than take over from other community development processes" (SCN 2003, p. 19). Local issues require local

knowledges, leaders and management. To be sustainable it must be community driven and owned.

4. Community empowerment and engagement

Capacity building goes beyond community consultation and involvement. Community empowerment may include the development of shared vision and recognition of shared history; large scale community involvement; direction setting and decision-making. Key outcomes of these processes are a greater sense of connectedness across the community and community ownership.

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. 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).

5. Inclusion

Inclusion is a key principle in much of the capacity building thinking. By engaging all groups, including those who in the past 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
- avoid social isolation and disconnection, fostering greater social capital and cohesion.

(Bush et al. 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 wellbeing
- a healthy and diverse economy which is financially viable over the long term.

(SCN 2003, pp. 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.

In considering approaches to building the capacity of GAs within BCC programs Volunteering Queensland identified seven potential mechanisms:

1. Leadership building

Developing grassroots leaders has practical short-term and long-term outcomes for the individuals involved, the groups they work within, partners, organisations and the broader community. Potential outcomes include more strategic approaches to how leaders work, the development and implementation of more effective solutions and longer-term sustainability (Kellogg Foundation 2003; MDC 2003).

2. Strengths-based strategic planning/appreciative enquiry

Appreciative enquiry is a strategic intervention which develops a common vision of the future based on core values and what has already been achieved by the group (Bushnell 2002, p. 15). Using an appreciative enquiry approach to strategic planning encourages the development of alternative scenarios to guide capacity building for community groups. It does not limit options to a narrow range image and immediate expectations (Sztompka 1994). It provides an alternative and positive framing for groups which are often traditionally focussed on issues and problems.

3. Education

A variety of education and training programs can provide both technical skills, such as those that assist direct service work or submission writing, as well as soft skills such as developing more effective groups or working with volunteers.

4. Mentoring

Leading community members are significant sources for capacity building since they can direct knowledge and inspiration to group members from the local level, unlike many top-down approaches (Kretzmann and McKnight 2003).

5. Participation, recruitment and group function

Effective participation in a variety of roles is widely recognised as a vital method of capacity building for community groups. Encouraging groups to focus on meaningful engagement and providing skills in working with volunteers will assist these processes.

6. Community engagement and networking

Networking among members of GAs with Council members, businesses, educational institutions and wider community members holds great potential for building the capacity of community groups (Chamala 1995). Members of GAs are significant local stakeholders in decision-making, a process largely reliant upon effective networking and relationship building.

7. Supporting and resourcing catalyst figures

Catalyst figures are a key to building capacities of community-based groups, since they act as community drivers, and role models. Newman (2001) has suggested that identifying, supporting and resourcing catalyst figures is central to any efforts to fast-track capacity building with limited resources.

Volunteering Queensland and Brisbane City Council set out to develop specific initiatives to assist groups at a grassroots level. This has resulted in three programs targeting three audiences: community leaders, the grassroots organisations and local community volunteers. These programs are: the Brisbane City Council Peer Leadership Program, the Catchment Group Strategic Capacity Building Project and the Habitat Brisbane Capacity Building Initiative.

The three capacity building programs

Initiated in 2001, the Community Peer Leadership Program has provided leadership development for voluntary leaders across a broad range of grassroots associations representing bushcare, multicultural development, sport and recreation, youth, arts and Indigenous organisations.

The program is unusual in that it draws participants from across a broad range of council programs, with a steering committee of BCC staff representatives from Parks and Environment, Youth, Sport and Recreation and Community Development.

Held on seven weekend days over a six-month period, participants cover content including both broad community education and technical skills development. The program has four major objectives:

1. To engage participants in learning experiences that validate their current leadership competencies.
2. To provide opportunities for participants to strengthen existing skills and develop new knowledge, skills and abilities.
3. To provide practical opportunities for the participants to translate these learnings into effective action within their own organisations and groups to enhance organisational objectives.
4. To further develop and enhance networking skills to foster local community networks for mutual benefits.

The program uses a wide variety of approaches in a workshop format which is both dialogic and experiential. Participants explore the areas of community leadership, working and leading groups, community development and capacity building, models of civil society and the third sectors, governance as well as social action and working with council. On a more technical level the focus is on working with volunteers, strategic planning, submission writing, group facilitation and management committee processes.

To maximise the benefits of the learning, three critical factors inform program design and delivery:

- there is a triple focus at all times, focussing on the individual leader, the community group they are leading, and the broader local community they are working in (Kellogg Foundation 2003)
- there is an integration of practical skills and critical reflection approaches (Shankland 2003)
- peer sharing, learning and validation is central to all aspects of the program through a focus on dialogue, experience sharing and peer learning groups.

Evaluations of the program over the past four years show it has been successful in enhancing both individual skills and knowledges, and building both organisational capacity and fostering local community networks.

The Catchment Group Strategic Capacity Building Project focuses on developing the catchment groups across Brisbane. Catchment groups play a major role in partnership with Brisbane City Council in identifying key water catchment management issues, prioritising them, and undertaking programs to address these issues as well as improving a variety of environmental outcomes for the catchment. The peak body of these groups — the Brisbane Catchments Network (BCN) — continues to facilitate this partnership by providing strategic advice and identifying issues common to all catchment groups across Brisbane.

The Capacity Building project began in 2004 and aimed to enhance the work of catchment groups throughout Brisbane. The process undertaken included an intensive capacity audit discussion

with each of the nine catchment groups across Brisbane. This was followed by instruction and development work tailored to each groups needs. A facilitative role was also taken in the continuing development of the BCN.

The capacity building model utilised by Volunteering Queensland underpinned the approach, which was informed by the strength-based practice and appreciative enquiry (e.g. see Bushnell et al. 2002).

First discussions with each group were based around an understanding of group change processes which suggests three stages of intervention:

- a) To focus the group on what it has achieved and what it needs to do in the future to build on its success.
- b) To have the group articulate these understandings and put its thinking into a stated set of ideas and approaches.
- c) To develop strategies for turning these ideas and approaches into tangible actions.

Once this had been achieved, a strategic planning process was used to complement and built on this approach. Each group was asked to consider and identify the following points:

1. Where are we now?
 - who are we — our strengths, our roles and our way of working
 - how we operate internally, in delivering our core business and in working in the broader community.
2. Where do we want to be?
 - who do we want to be — our future achievements, what we want or need to do
 - what we want to do to improve our operations internally, in delivering our core business and in working in the broader community.
3. What do we need to get there?
 - what are the skills, knowledges, approaches, relationships which we need to achieve our objectives
 - recognising our particular set of values and ways of working.
4. What is the plan to move forward?

Once each catchment group had identified their plan for moving forward the focus changed to working with the catchment group to realise one of their stated projects.

One of the key successes of this program to date has been the positive reframing many groups felt occurred through focussing on strengths and achievements. Catchment groups are comprised

almost exclusively of volunteers and there is a high level of professionalism from the majority of those involved. The processes used identified a wide variety of expertises and passions in a way which was quite unusual and effective. Through the process it was identified that the groups display technical, strategic, project management and hands-on skills that provide an invaluable resource to Brisbane City Council and builds social capital within the Brisbane community. These groups provide a variety of tangible and intangible outcomes, which offers significant potential and capacity for the future.

Projects identified and worked on by individual catchment groups included developing community engagement strategies, developing an operational plan, facilitating corporate community partnerships, reviewing membership approaches and facilitating specific projects.

Habitat Brisbane Capacity Building Initiative

The Habitat Brisbane program is a volunteer bushcare program where Brisbane City Council supports local community groups to restore natural habitats in parks, remnant bushland and wetlands and along waterways. These groups also help protect, monitor and increase native flora and fauna populations, especially rare and threatened species. The Capacity Building Initiative is being piloted in the North Region of Brisbane with 24 groups and has four stages. These are:

1. Conduct an assessment of current strengths and challenges in regards to capacity building with the Habitat Brisbane program.
2. Facilitation of a series of capacity conversations in the shape of forums among key stakeholders to generate ideas and initiatives
3. Undertaking a capacity mapping exercise, identifying key capacity initiatives for the next two to three years and identifying catalysts to drive these processes forward.
4. Providing support for these initiatives as they develop over the next twelve months.

During Stage One of the program the capacity of community-based environmental groups was evaluated through assessing the following key factors:

1. Group identity and function

Factors to be considered include: is there a focus on creating and maintaining a healthy group culture; how do group members share and acquire knowledge; what does the group do to foster internal cohesiveness; how does the group encourage diversity and innovation?

2. Group action and leadership

Factors to be considered include: how does the group carry out planning; is planning effective; how do groups implement projects; does implementation follow guidelines; how do group members work as individuals within the team; how does the group encourage and support group leadership?

3. Community engagement

Factors to be considered include: how is the group profile promoted within the community; how does the group identify and work with potential networks/partners; how does the group recruit volunteers/members as required; what processes and strategies are in place for retaining volunteers/members?

4. Site assessment, planning and project implementation

Factors to be considered include: how is site assessment and project planning undertaken by the group; how is bush restoration managed by the group; what skills and abilities can the group access in respect to plant identification, vegetation management, weed and fauna management; and what other specific skills are accessible within the group?

5. Celebrating success

Factors to be considered include: how does the group promote awareness of good practice; what processes for recognition and reward for achievements does the group use; how does the group ensure the continued development of good practice?

With the program now in stage two as of August 2005, a range of initiatives are underway or about to commence. These initiatives came directly from the capacity conversations held during this stage of the project.

Projects commenced to date include:

- a weed mapping project, which will identify key weeds across the region and also assist in developing relationships between bushcare groups, assist in encouraging a key role for the Catchment Network in the region and identify areas of common concern and opportunities for collective action
- sharing of training opportunities between different sections of the council's environment sections
- development of a portable workshop which will assist groups enhance the way they plan and manage the work they do.

Key learnings of capacity building

Volunteering Queensland and Brisbane City Council have now worked together on a number of quite distinct and different capacity building projects. The following are some key learnings we have gained through these projects to date.

1. Using an enabling rather than a directive approach is required in any work which is aimed at developing trust and respect. Ensuring that any initiative was driven by the group rather than by the partners (BCC/VQ) allowed for a unique approach to and for each group rather than a 'one size fits all' approach. This can be quite challenging to maintain, as GAs are time-challenged and seek quick solutions from the 'expert' rather than exploring knowledge from within the group.

2. The approach used was dialogic with a clear recognition of the informal nature of many of the groups and a way of working which was relaxed but effective. Questions were used to facilitate discussion and encourage exploration of possible assistance. Corporate models of capacity building need to give way to an exploration of a variety of more practical approaches.

3. A capacity building approach requires that all aspects on how the GA operates needs to be open for inclusion in the capacity building exercise, whether this reflects the group's internal operations, its core business or its role in the broader community. This encourages consideration of both the technical and soft skills required to enhance the work of the group. Each group has its own history, culture, values and ways of working and so each initiative is unique.

4. One of the challenges has been to avoid making traditional assumptions (based on more formal organisations) about what worked and what does not work.

5. When working with individuals and groups the focus needs to be on positive elements of the group and how these groups could be enhanced rather than on the problems the groups may be facing. This ensured that a capacity and developmental engagement process was central to how we worked together. It also avoided the group spending a great deal of time revisiting the problems or issues of the past. Capacity building is asset/strength-based, internally focussed and relationship driven (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). The focus is on building on achievements and capacities while addressing the challenges.

6. One of the great challenges in working with GAs is the need to acknowledge and work with the challenge of limited resources while seeking input from all group volunteers. Even for large non-profit organisations there are no quick fixes. Capacity building is an ongoing effort and is resource intensive (McKinsey & Co. 2001). With GAs any approach in capacity building is long term, with

the recognition that this is an ongoing process. Changes of personnel (primarily all volunteer staff, many with other work and family commitments add to the complexity of this issue). In an attempt to address this issue, these projects endeavoured to embed initiatives within the group, rather than to direct projects at individuals.

While the challenges may seem a little daunting at times, evaluation and feedback of the capacity initiatives to date has identified that the programs have been beneficial in many ways. Specifically, they have assisted in creating:

- a clearer sense of purpose, identity and goals of groups
- more effective planning, action and use of resources
- greater ability and skills to address problems and explore opportunities
- revitalised confidence, commitment and energy in the work undertaken
- higher levels of retention and wellness of community members, leaders and groups
- greater community capacity for action and more sustainable community initiatives.

Conclusion

Over the past four years Brisbane City Council and Volunteering Queensland have initiated and developed a range of capacity building programs which have focussed on developing and enhancing the work of grassroots associations. These programs have reflected the recognition by Brisbane City Council of the significance of community engagement in building and maintaining the city's social and environmental capital. Participants in these programs regard these practical capacity building initiatives as recognition of their efforts and worth by BCC for the work in which they are involved. Moreover, Brisbane City Council regards the investment in the development of community groups and members as a valuable investment for the long-term benefit of the broader Brisbane community.

The relationship developed between Brisbane City Council and Volunteering Queensland has been built on mutual trust and respect and the willingness to implement new initiatives based on feedback from community as well as grounded on an understanding of theory and research.

The approaches used have been diverse and the processes used within each approach have been iterative. They provide the basis for a range of future initiatives to continue to support this most vital of sectors.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to acknowledge the work of Deb Olive of Volunteering Queensland who has made a central and significant contribution to the capacity building initiatives described in this paper, and Natasha Wright who worked as research assistant during parts of these projects.

References

Agrawal A & Gibson C 2001, *Community and the Environment*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick.

Bush R, Mutch A & Dower J 2002, *Community Capacity Index Manual*, Centre for Primary Health Care, University of Queensland, Brisbane.

Bushnell D, Bergthold K & Agger-Gupta N 2002, 'Building Social Capital and Organizational Capacity in Community-Based Nonprofit Organizations Through Appreciative Inquiry', *OD Practitioner*, vol. 34, no. 4, pp. 14-19.

Cavaye J 1999, *The Role of Government in Community Capacity Building*, Department of Primary Industries, Queensland.

Chamala S 1995, 'Overview of Participative Action Approaches in Australian Land and Water Management', in eds S Chamala & K Keith, *Participative Approaches for Landcare*, Australian Academic Press, Brisbane, pp. 5-42.

Creyton M 2003, 'Making an Impact: enhancing the effectiveness of unfunded and small voluntary organisations and groups', Volunteering Queensland website, <<http://www.volqld/>>.

Creyton M 2004, 'Re-engaging the citizen in post modern Times: A look at different terms and approaches', <http://www.volqld.org.au/leadership/cde_article5.html>.

Hashagen S 2002, 'Models of Community Engagement', Scottish Community Development Association, <http://www.scdc.org.uk/resources_reports/models%20of%20engagement%20web%20version.doc>.

Kellogg Foundation 2003, 'Grassroots Leadership Development: a guide for grassroots leaders, support organisations and funders', <http://www.wkkf.org/Pubs/GrassrtsSptFndrs2PC_2003_01_21_00439_00814.pdf>.

Klausen, K 1995, "On the Malfunction of the Generic Approach in Small Voluntary Organisations" *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, vol.5, no. 3, pp. 275-90.

Kretzmann J & McKnight J 1993, *Building Communities from the Inside Out: a path toward finding and mobilizing a community's assets*, ACTA Publications, Chicago.

Lyons M 2001, *Third Sector*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney.

McGregor-Lowndes M 2005, personal communication.

McKinsey & Company 2001, *Effective Capacity Building in Nonprofit Organisations*, Venture Philanthropy Partners, Washington DC.

Mayer S 2002, *Building Community Capacity: how different groups contribute*, <<http://www.effectivecommunities.com>>.

MDC 2003, *Fertile Ground: Reflections on Grassroots Leadership Development*, Mary Babcock Foundation, Salem.

Newman A 2001, *Built to Change: catalytic capacity building in nonprofit organisations*, The David and Lucile Packard Foundation, Los Altos.

Regional Women's Advisory Council 2002, 'The Success Factors: managing change in regional and rural Australia', *Australian Journal of Volunteering*, vol. 7, no.1, pp. 6-10.

Shankland A 2001, *Building Capacity at the Grassroots: a review of lessons form ACORD's experience in Southern Africa*, <<http://www.acord.org.uk/inacord/inAcord2/InAcord2Art3.htm>>.

Smith D H 1997a, 'Grassroots Associations are Important: some theory and a review of the impact literature', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 3, pp. 296-306.

Smith D H 1997b, 'The Rest of the Nonprofit Sector: Grassroots Associations as the Dark Matter Ignored in Prevailing 'Flat Earth' Maps of the Sector', *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, vol. 26, no. 2, pp. 114-31.

Smith D H & Shen C 1996, 'Factors Characterizing the Most Effective Nonprofits Managed by Volunteers', *Nonprofit Management and Leadership*, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 271-81.

Sustainable Communities Network 2003a, 'Community Capacity, Health Inequities and Sustainable Communities: draft for discussion version 1', <http://scn.ecu.edu.au/news_publications.php>.

Sztompka P 1994, *The Sociology of Social Change*, Blackwell Publishers, Oxford.

Wright N 2005, *The Capacity Building Initiative: A Resource Document*, unpublished manuscript.