

Innovation and Transformation in Community Practice: Lessons from Ten Years of Regional and Rural Community Research

Stehlik D^{1*} & Chenoweth L²

¹ Director, Alcoa Research Centre for Stronger Communities, Curtin University of Technology,
Perth, Australia

² Director, Internationalisation, School of Social Work and Applied Human Sciences,
University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia

Abstract

The concept of community development is constantly under review. Over the past decade community developers in Australia and in North America are continually reflecting on alternative models that incorporate differences within communities, rather than seeking to homogenise them. Queensland, along with most of rural and regional Australia, has experienced difficult times in the past decade, with environmental and economic factors creating social stressors. In addition, policy makers are demanding alternative models which build and develop community strengths, focus on diversity and which seek to identify and capture the capacities of rural communities to survive in adversity. In Australia, this is highlighted by these policy makers as a demand for 'evidence-based policy' within community capacity building frameworks.

This paper suggests that such demands are framed within larger theoretical debates about social capital building, community resiliency and in Australia, working towards a 'triple bottom line' approach — that is, incorporating social, economic and environmental factors. This paper outlines perspectives derived from over ten years of research conducted by the authors in Queensland, one of Australia's largest and most decentralised states, where the challenge of distance and lack of community services poses a major challenge to practice. Our research, which has guided our praxis (theory and practice), has enabled a re-conceptualisation of community building, one that draws on social capital and community resiliency models, encourages difference and works to reject oppression, but one which at the same time identifies a further important action; that is, the active role of the practitioner within the process. We have termed this process *transformative and innovative community building* (TICB). This paper not only analyses the theoretical perspectives underpinning TICB, but also describes how such a process can be seen in action, by drawing on very recent research conducted in Queensland, with practitioners working alongside their rural and remote communities. This recent research — a formative evaluation — was undertaken in a participative approach, and thus the evidences gathered, from community member, stakeholders and practitioners have provided the TICB model a richness and depth to add to current community development debates.

Setting the scene ...

As one of the most regionally diverse and largest states in Australia, Queensland has always provided a challenging geographic environment in which to provide government services for people. Unlike other large states in Australia, Queensland is very regionalised with a large proportion of its population living outside of the metropolitan southeast corner (which includes Brisbane and the Gold and Sunshine Coasts). Queensland is a resource-rich state, with agriculture, mining and tourism as major sites of production. In the past decade, its rural sector has struggled against falling world commodity prices (particularly in beef and sugar), climatic change and population drift in search of employment.

The push for sustainable regional/rural development underpins public policy in Australia but continues still to be argued at the level of an economic discourse. This suggests that only the economically productive can participate in debates about rural communities and their sustainability within a globalised, post-industrial framework. To the frustration of many, such debates remain centralised and occur outside rural landscapes thus excluding many diverse groups of Australians who do not live in cities (for an up-to-date overview, see Cheers and Luloff 2001). At the end of what has been a decade of change in rural and regional Queensland, there is a perception that a 'worrying gulf' is emerging between people living in the country¹ and those in metropolitan centres and that this gulf — often blamed on 'globalisation' — is the major contributor to a diminished quality of life for the 'bush'. We have seen a strident debate questioning the 'necessity' of small communities (fewer than 4000) that are not seen as 'viable'.² This ignores the hopes and wishes of Australians living in such environments whose commitment to their communities remains. However, their own health, wellbeing and quality of life is in jeopardy through rationalist, reductionist 'urban-based' policies, which tend to homogenise and universalise. Such policies remain inherently flawed in their lack of understanding of the micro differences of 'living in rural Australia' (Chenoweth and Stehlik 1999).

'Rural' Australia should be seen as a very diverse landscape incorporating, as it does, remote locations. It includes, obviously, farming areas but also agricultural service centres, mining towns, coastal communities attracting holiday-makers and retirees, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, remote islands, alternative communities, wilderness and desert areas as well as all of our major regional centres. 'Remote Australia' takes into account those smaller settlements distanced from service centres or inaccessible to them and is more likely to include a greater proportion of indigenous Australians. In this sense, 'regional' has come to meet those larger centres of population, which may or may not be centred within rural spaces. Such classifications are both useful and dangerous. They are useful as we use them as a 'short hand' for complex ideas, but they are dangerous when they become stereotypic. For

¹ Federal Minister John Anderson, quoted in *The Australian*, 18 February 1999, p. 2.

² 'Let Tiny Towns Die, says expert', article in *The Courier Mail*, 5 July 2000, p. 3.

example, many 'rural' Australians resent the increasing use of the term 'regional' — seeing it as being all those who live on the eastern side of the Great Divide, in other words, those who live on the coastal fringe.³ It needs to be stressed, therefore, that such definitions must include the diversity inherent in non-metropolitan communities. Commentators have been making this argument for many years, but particularly since 1996 when governments attempted to deal with the climatic crisis (drought) in a homogenous 'one-size-fits-all' way (see Stehlik et al. 2000).

Diversity as a source of community strength

By using the principles of biodiversity and sustainability from ecology, in this paper we propose that communities that embrace and include diversity of people are stronger and more resilient and thereby build the capacity to develop a sustainable (longer-term) future. In nature, diverse systems, plants, animals and organisms develop, adapt and grow in response to changed circumstances. It is this range and variety that makes the whole system stronger and if disease or disaster attacks one element of the system, it does not follow that all the system will collapse or be adversely affected. In this form of interdependency, the concept of reflexivity, or biological feedback, is also important. We depend on biodiversity for our survival and quality of life. It is this very diversity that makes systems strong and vital. We suggest that communities as large systems require diversity and difference for their long-term survival. Thus uniformity becomes the recipe for ecological disaster and, following Jim Ife (1997a, 1997b, 2000), we suggest that uniformity of culture may turn out to be uniformity of a maladaptive or destructive culture resulting in the breakdown of human civilisation. Ife goes further to propose that this is what is being experienced in cultural globalisation. Just as diversity is a prerequisite for sustainability in ecological systems, so our communities need to embrace all people, including those who are vulnerable, to build resiliency and sustainability.

It is now well established that rural and remote areas in Australia start from an unequal position. Rural people (and particularly those in remote regions) suffer as a result of absence or inaccessibility of many services, with the poor quality of such services that are available, poor service coordination and having to endure inappropriate, urban-based service delivery models. This paper draws on research conducted in Queensland over the past ten years with a variety of human service practitioners and community developers, working both within the public and non-government sectors and particularly, most recently, those who have been working alongside people with disabilities and their families. We outline here what we term a Transformative and Innovative Community Building (TICB) model and establish the theoretical dimensions as a framework for such a model, beginning to explore its capacity for building sustainable, resilient communities. While based on many years of empirical research, this paper does not outline the methodology undertaken or analyse specific findings. Instead, we highlight those theoretical aspects of the model that we believe enable a deeper

³ More than 80 per cent of Australians live within 80 kilometres of the coastline.

understanding of the interrelationships between social capital, resiliency and power. Our research supports some 'emergent signs' towards resiliency — that is, that despite the hardship, the withdrawal of services and the pressures of change, many communities are fighting back, using resistance strategies to achieve their goals of long-term sustainability. Our findings have identified a critical factor in the success of such resiliency, *the transformative and innovative alliance building between individuals/families and their human service practitioners*. These practitioners operate as both advocates and community developers. Their dual role enables them to actively participate in developing individual and community capacity, as well as enabling a framework for overall community resiliency to emerge. However, most importantly, our research has shown that it is by the act of incorporating diversity as a component of social capital, that true capacity building and resiliency can emerge. Our national stocks of compassion as Australians may be a little low at present, given the events regarding the *SS Tampa* and the public expression of views on asylum seekers and people from different ethnic or religious backgrounds.⁴ Perhaps what is required is the development of *compassion* capital; that is, we need to be investing more in ways to develop tolerance and acceptance of all people and reducing the fear of difference. The TICB model as we have devised it rests on a primary theoretical framework — that of power/oppression. The paper also discusses other dimensions of the model, its transformative, innovative and spatial dimensions. It concludes with some reflections on the model's capacity across communities and challenges for future practice.

Sustainability through inclusion of diversity

Social capital researcher Ian Falk argues that

“Sustainability, regional and community development share strong underlying needs. There is the need to accept and implement change, the need for accepting diverse values and views, learning to work together, developing alternative means of reaching goals, leadership issues and team work” (Falk 1997, p. 24).

He goes on to present the 'learning community' as a concept that can be seen as a 'strategic process' in community capacity building and sustainability. While we would strongly support such a view (see Chenoweth and Stehlik 1997, 2002), our research in Queensland increasingly highlights how difficult such strategic processes become for individuals when who are often working from a base of marginalisation, ostracism and stigmatisation. In other words, Falk's community capacity is only available to those who can actively participate,

⁴ During the lead-up to the Federal election in October 2000, the *SS Tampa* was held in international waters with over 400 rescued asylum seekers (largely from the Middle East) on board. For several weeks between August and September, decisions as to the future of these people were discussed and media coverage heightened public debate. The so-called 'Pacific Solution' directed them to be placed in Papua New Guinea, Nauru and New Zealand. They were not permitted to step on Australian soil.

whose standard of education enables such action, who are confident in working within groups and who are made welcome within them.

We would argue that the concept of diversity and its relationship to the oppression/empowerment dichotomy lies at the heart of an understanding of community capacity building. Drawing on the writings of Iris Marion Young (1989, 1990a, 1990b, 1994), we suggest that an understanding of oppression and how such oppression(s) are “systematically reproduced in major economic, political and cultural institutions” (1990a, p. 41) becomes crucial in any discussion of sustainability. Young argues that for every oppressed group there does not have to be a corresponding oppressor, but rather a group that is “*privileged* in relation” to other groups (p. 42 emphasis in original). Importantly, Young also points out that her definition of group is not in the traditional, anthropological sense, but rather as those group meanings “which constitute people's identities in terms of the cultural forms, social situation and history that group members know are theirs” (p. 44). According to Young, people take up the notion of belonging to a group because of their perceived oppression. Such membership identification becomes important to them even if it identifies a common oppression (p. 47) and while many groups experience one or another; others experience all. Young suggests such oppression has five faces: exploitation, marginalisation, powerlessness, cultural imperialism and violence. All are of relevance to our argument, but cultural imperialism, wherein a group is marked by a “paradoxical oppression, in that they are both marked out by stereotypes and at the same time rendered invisible” (p. 47) provides an insight into the power dynamics experienced by people (and their families) whose lives have been changed through disability.

The concept of oppression discussed above connects with the notion of citizenship and the politics of difference. Here 'difference' needs to be brought to the foreground within any discussion of oppression. When any group is excluded, the whole concept of community and all who live in them is severely limited. While as a dynamic, this remains little understood, it nevertheless requires all of us as community developers to make it more evident. The presence of vulnerable people helps us all understand diversity and understand and thereby confront the power of fear and prejudice.

The degree to which communities are 'healthy' can be gauged partly by the degree to which vulnerable and different people are provided supports to contribute and be part of the community. Conversely, the degree to which communities separate people for various purposes, is the degree to which communities are weakened, their resiliency is lessened and their capacity for survival challenged. In Australia, we have increasingly weakened our communities by structurally and systematically separating people from one another. In virtually every arena, when we try to develop efforts to address issues, we develop something that separates us. These include, as we alluded to earlier in this paper, not just detention

centres for asylum seekers, but also prisons, group homes, nursing homes, even retirement villages. We spend large amounts of money to separate people. Then we spend more money for professional programs whose stated purpose is to 'integrate' people back into society. For community building as a whole, this struggle serves as a 'social barometer' of the strength of the community. If people with disabilities (or elderly people, or people with mental illness or refugees) are not in our midst, if they are the 'strangers' on the edge of a community, we can be assured that, whatever the images on the surface may show, that community has important weaknesses that emerge over time.

Young argues that difference is a real political resource for democratic societies. We take this one step further to argue that difference is also a resource for vital and healthy communities. However in this we are not arguing for a 'politics of difference' response, which Young also rejects. This suggests that a pursuit of the common good was simply inadequate to address the oppression and injustices that each particular group experienced. Instead, Young suggests that the commitment to a common good has been destroyed by the politics of difference, with a "cacophony of self-interested demands for recognition and redress, where groups within their private identities are unwilling or unable to communicate or cooperate" with marginalised groups (1990a, p. 84) those who — for reasons of their 'difference' either racial, ethnic, religious, or in our example, disability — are either completely excluded from formal citizenship within the liberal philosophic sense or granted 'second-class' citizenship (1989, p. 257). Thus policies (such as those that promote a non-inclusive capacity building approach) that posit the notion of universal citizenship remain flawed, first because they tend to homogenise and thus ignore difference, and second, because they are in fact predicated on assumptions of second-class citizenship.

Young writes that "such rights and rules that are universally formulated and thus blind to differences of race, culture, gender, age, or disability, *perpetuate* rather than undermine oppression" (p. 267). Such perpetuation conceptualises difference as "deviance or deficiency" and "others" (p. 268) groups and consequently the privilege associated with being the group positioned as 'normal', it allows a projection of these elite "group-based capacities, values, and cognitive and behavioural styles as the norm to which all persons should be expected to conform" (p. 268). Young suggests that "to the degree that groups are culturally different,... equal treatment in many issues of social policy is unjust because it denies these cultural differences or makes them a liability" (1989, p. 271). As Young, and Yeatman (1994a, 1994b, 1996) both argue, such oppression become bound up with notions of 'community', as Yeatman writes that "Community and difference are mutual exclusive terms in [a] conception of a citizenship community" (1994a, p. 80). We therefore ask, is this why as a society, we seem unable (or unwilling) to take up the challenge of sustainability and resiliency within a diversity framework? Are different groups and stakeholders so influenced by the demand for competition within a market economy that they have lost the capacity for collaborative action

and thus the potential to achieve more creative and meaningful outcomes for vulnerable people?

Social capital, capacity building and resiliency — towards a model of diversity

One of the great challenges facing all rural/regional communities, and the governments that support them, is to maintain viable rural environments through building sustainable communities. All too often however, responses to such challenges tend to focus on the negative factors of change, rather than exploring the positive possibilities — particularly the idea of community resiliency. Communities can be considered as being 'resilient' when they respond to crises in ways that act to strengthen communal bonds, resources and their capacity to cope. The search to identify determinants associated with community resiliency in order to better understand sustainability has become the focus of international research (see Kulig and Brown 1996–97). However, to date, it has been based on research within communities that have experienced sudden 'one-off' disasters (e.g. mining tragedies). Findings from these studies identified the important concepts of community support, community empowerment and communal coping as "broad categories of community protective factors [so that] when a community moves through the process of resiliency it becomes more successful at mastering adversity and change" (Stewart et al. 1996–97, p. 73).

It has been argued that social capital can be understood to be social networks and their strength and quality operate within families, between families and within communities. Importantly, the health and capacity of the community is seen as crucial in the development of children and in the "transmission of parents' human capital to their children" (Stone and Hughes 2001, p. 2). Experience over the past decade shows that such social capital does not emerge 'fully formed', it requires active support and encouragement (Chenoweth and Stehlik 2004). The linkages social capital allows between families, communities and wider society can be supported both formally and informally. Central to the notion of community capacity building are social coalitions between the public, private and volunteer sectors. Local solutions to local problems is the key, good community leadership is the goal, and the aim is to establish strong communities which will support weaker families, and stronger families to support weaker communities (see Stone 2000, p. 5 for more discussion).

It is now well recognised, for example, that volunteering is a crucial 'plank' in the overall social capital framework. However, as volunteering in rural Australia declines, primarily as the impact of climate change and economic depression creates an environment where people focus on themselves and their families, rather than their communities, the importance of dedicated and targeted formal supports becomes crucial. The maintenance of social capital, is also the responsibility of formal support systems as well as private enterprise and all levels of government. Concomitant with the decline in volunteering, there has also been a growth in

policies that support a 'self help' model of community care. This self help model can also be seen as a further 'plank' in the framework of social capital — however it should not be seen as a reason *not* to provide formal service supports.

Our research takes all this work further by identifying that community practitioners have a legitimate (and under recognised) role in resiliency building in rural communities, thus contributing to these communities' potential sustainability by building social capital. The impact of human service policies in rural communities and the role of individual human service practitioners in redefining and reinterpreting such policies within regional communities has, to date, not been well understood (Stehlik and Chenoweth 1999). Our findings suggest that the operation of such networks, particularly in environments that lack community resources, becomes an important factor in an understanding how community capacity building and resiliency operates.

The TICB model — some propositions

Four emergent propositions form the basis of the TICB model. These are discussed briefly below:

(1) *That while the decline in the traditional rural economic base has undermined the social fabric of rural communities, there is little understanding of the reasons why some communities 'fight' against such decline.* The model of community resiliency is grounded in an understanding of agency. We consider an individual to be 'resilient' if they can recover from setbacks, or maintain their sense of perspective in adversity. In the same way, communities can be considered as having resilience capabilities. Brown and Kulig (1996–97, p. 42) suggest that there are two components to community resiliency — the first aspect is 'reactive' and the second, and more important if connected to sustainability — is 'proactive', moving in a positive way beyond the immediate situation. Our findings suggest that the practitioner within a small community often acts as the 'linkage' person thus enabling this transition from 'reactive' to 'proactive'. This is what is meant by the *transformative* nature of our model.

As Brown and Kulig (1996–97, p. 43) point out, "community resiliency refers to the capacity of community members to engage in projects of coordinated action within the context of their community despite events and structures that constrain such projects". Within the current theoretical community development literature, such 'action' is often identified as flowing from 'animateurs' or charismatic leaders (Herbert-Cheshire 2001). This tends to assume that reanimation of community spirit relies on such individuals, rejecting the more important, and yet less visible, networks of support and alliances that are developed over many years and under many different circumstances between professionals and community individuals (Collier 1993). Such transformative alliances lie at the heart of our model.

(2) *That the state response to the 'rural decline' has been an increasing proliferation of human services — resulting in an impact as yet little understood.* Here, Queensland offers an important site of study. It has many characteristics that are being experienced by rural communities in North America, South Africa and New Zealand. It is an environment which is demographically changing, where many communities are in decline (Mackenzie 1994; Beer et al. 1994) and where the decade-long drought of the 1990s and the subsequent fall in commodity prices had a long-term impact on the viability and sustainability of many individuals and their communities (Stehlik et al. 1999). For historical reasons, Queensland has less human service infrastructure, particularly in the important areas of aged care, disability services and home and community care. To those individuals who live beyond the eastern seaboard, their access to services remains at the basic level often resulting in considerable hardship and sacrifice (Stehlik and Lawrence 1996). In addition, the extent of the rural decline in Australia has been experienced to a greater degree in these smaller (fewer than 4000 residents) shires (Lawrence 1995).

The federal and state government response to the impact of the drought in the early 1990s was to increase the numbers of human service practitioners — specifically, drought relief workers, farm financial counsellors and suicide prevention counsellors. A number of these practitioners were sited and employed in local government settings – a new challenge to these organisations that had previously focussed on rates, roads and engineering. Local government⁵ and its involvement in the human service industry in Australia since the mid 1980s still continues to be little understood and less documented and requires more conceptual understanding. The TICB model incorporates the partnership model of community-building, it has demonstrated the importance to the wider community of the alliance building between practitioners and their clients. Drawing on the capacity to incorporate difference, the proactive and reflexive nature of the model enables even those communities who are quite vulnerable, the potential to move to a sustainable future (for a more detailed analysis on one such community case study see Stehlik 1999).

(3) *That at the same time, human services have become more decentralised, more fragmented and increasingly reliant on privatised forms of care — the shifting boundaries between public and private.* The debates about the welfare state in western industrialised nations in the past thirty years have focussed on its 'crisis' and 'retreat' (Burkitt and Ashton 1996; Saunders 1994). There is much written about the way in which the welfare state is being realigned and redistributed to take up issues of globalisation and regulation — with the discourses changing from 'rights' to 'obligations'.

⁵ There are three tiers of government in Australia — federal, state and local. In the past two decades, there has been an increasing demand on local government to become more involved in community development and human service activity.

While the direct impact of such changes are only now being felt within rural environments, (and resulted in increasing political agitation) nevertheless the impact of the proliferation of human services offers an increased positive potential to change the latent but potentially resilient environment. Our research has focussed on those communities with few 'natural' assets that could encourage more traditional economic development, and yet the alliance building approach strengthens the capacity to manage the challenges of change.

(4) That the growth of such human services is contributing to new forms of community resiliency — through the effect of employment of practitioners and enabling individuals to remain in their own communities — thus allowing these communities to maintain their sustainability. The rural decline and decline of traditional labour activities has resulted in an increase in the form of human services. These activities value-add to the economic base of rural and regional communities. The potential to resiliency, we would argue, rests in those interactive 'partnerships' being developed between local government, human service practitioners and their communities. Such partnerships can themselves be seen as emerging from the challenge to sustainability and thus sustainability itself can then be seen as resulting from developing such proactive responses to potential change. While the inherent growth of professionals in such communities has some correlation with the consequent decline in volunteers, despite rural communities having had a strong ethic of responsibility and volunteerism in the past, evidence is growing that human service practitioners are maintaining the volunteer networks and re-creating enthusiasm again for new volunteer effort.

Dimensions of the TICB model

The model therefore rests on the following dimensions — transformative, innovative and spatial — within a framework of power/oppression as outlined above. Our research has undertaken both a macro level view of the interrelationship (or alliance-building) between the human service sector and local government in rural community resiliency building as well as a micro level view from the perspective of those individuals involved in building such alliances and we suggest that in this context, the link between such alliance-building and community sustainability, lies in the notion of 'praxis'; that is, as policy-as-experience (see Yanow 1993). Thus community development praxis becomes the key agent that successfully fuses the dimensions within the model, and thus our dimensions focus on this praxis conceptualisation of the model.

Transformative dimensions

These include: reflexivity, safeguarding and inclusive practices. By reflexivity, we mean building into our practice the capacity to critical reflect on it. All too often, our work becomes focussed on the day-to-day, we tend to operate within crises and spend little, if any time, in contemplation. The TICB model rests on a reflexive, thoughtful practice. This reflexivity thus enables a safeguarding component to be built in. If we identify what the principles of our

practice with people we wish to safeguard are, and then build our reflexivity around thus principles, we enable transformation to begin. As we discussed above, oppression and power become major stimulants for rejection within communities. We must be careful to safeguard any interventions to avoid the risk of continued rejection. We should not be supporting practice where people are further harmed by rejection.

Innovative dimensions

While ideals of community practice tend to posit 'community' as a romantic idealised place (Stehlik 2000) we suggest that our innovative dimensions are firmly grounded and highly pragmatic. Firstly, by the 'gathering of wisdom'. By this we mean using our reflective practice to come to a deeper understanding as to what works and what doesn't. We should not continually 'reinvent wheels' but rather learn from each other and from our communities. We should also be open to ideas that do not necessarily 'fit' with our own world views. This is where the important component of reciprocity emerges. By working with people, by establishing trust and enabling empowerment, we are also in the active process of reciprocating. By drawing on others' wisdom, we build our own. By not having all the answers, by practising a little humility at times, innovative practice emerges. Such practice also rests on the capacity for resource flexibility — not being so bound up in rules and guidelines that actively work against enabling innovation to emerge. Such resource flexibility does not necessarily just involve access to funds, although that does help, but it also means being able to manage without being *over-managed*; and enjoying active but not oppressive, supervision. Such supervision within community development practice is at the core of praxis and crucial in our understanding of the potential of the TICB model. Our experience highlights how important the concept of renewal becomes within such supervision. This means enabling community practitioners to take time from their daily work, to come together in active renewal events, such as training days, workshops and other opportunities.

Spatial dimensions

The final dimension rests on a deeper understanding of the places and spaces in which people work. As we described above, our research is being conducted outside of metropolitan settings. We have identified a strong spatial dimension to the TICB model, one that begins to challenge some of the deeply held views about what meanings we assign to 'urban' and 'rural', and the dimensions of discourses about 'community' which shape such current meanings (see Stehlik 2000 for a more detailed discussion). The challenge for those of us working in rural Australia in these early years of a new century (both practitioners and researchers) is to accept difference, understand resistances, celebrate our historical antecedents (without excluding those that 'don't fit') and maintain a high level of reflexivity (difficult to undertake, but important to attempt). All of us working as either practitioners or researchers in regional/rural settings in Australia need to maintain our awareness of place, of landscape and of identity. We need to recognise just how important meanings of place are to

people and not to just dismiss those meanings in a structural, reductionist analysis which denies their own experiences and their own narratives.

We now turn to briefly describe one program that is taking up the challenges of the TICB model.

TICB in action — Local Area Coordination (LAC)

Local Area Coordination offers a uniquely Australian, low-cost, high quality model of service delivery to individuals and families of people with disabilities. It originated in rural Western Australia, where it was established in the early 1980s in the southwest region of that state. Its purpose then was to provide support to those individuals, their families and carers, whose access to mainstream services had been disadvantaged by geographic distance from the metropolitan settings, where all such services were then located. In rural Western Australia, as in Queensland, to have a disability in the 1950s or 1960s usually meant moving to another place to obtain services. As this was usually either Perth or Brisbane, it was also often within an institution. The resulting impact was painful, and in some cases it resulted in family breakdown. Such policies did not build sustainable, resilient communities or social capital.

The Local Area Coordinator, as established in Western Australia, became an advocate for people, someone with a 'broad range of skills, experience and local knowledge' (WADSC 1998, p. 2). The service spread throughout country Western Australia, and eventually into the metropolitan area of Perth as well. By 1997–98, the Disability Services Commission in Western Australia was responsible for 91 Local Area Coordinators "covering 70% of the State, with an annual expenditure of approximately \$11.5m." (WADSC 1998, p. 2).

The pilot project in Queensland was officially 'launched' late in 1999 to establish Local Area Coordination (LAC) in Queensland. This identified six sites and nine LACs in the following diverse geographic locations — Gympie, Hervey Bay, Murgon, Munduberra, Mount Isa and Cooktown. The locations for the initial pilot was predicated on a number of criteria including: that they be in regional, rural or remote Queensland; they be located within or near an Indigenous community; they should have little or no 'service' infrastructure at present; there should be a high identified unmet need; and that of geographic distance and isolation from existing disability support services. In other words, the most challenging communities become involved in the pilot program.

An important and crucial difference to the original LAC model established in Western Australia⁶ was that, apart from individual and family support, 'community development' would also become core business for each LAC from the foundation of the program as well as

⁶ It should be noted that while the Western Australian model now includes community development, this was not its earlier and foundational purpose.

individual/family support. This community capacity building component of the LAC program has made it a uniquely a Queensland approach, and one that led directly to our development of the TICB model.

Between 2001 and 2002, the authors completed a formative evaluation of this pilot program. There were two components to the evaluation: an Impact Evaluation to determine the impacts and outcomes of LAC against its stated objectives; and a Process or Formative Evaluation using a participatory research approach to gather information about LAC and to feed this information into the LAC pilot as it was being implemented. All instruments were developed in partnership with LACs, local advisors and the stakeholder reference group. Learning and knowledge gained in this process has been shared across the LAC community through the period of the evaluation. The impact evaluation involved the collection and analysis of data from families, people with disabilities, LAC coordinators and staff and other relevant stakeholders. Methods included interviews, surveys and reviewing of file notes. Existing records (e.g. electronic recording) were analysed. Community profiles in each of the six locations were developed (Chenoweth and Stehlik 2002).

This evaluation found that the LAC program is unique in its capacity to support both the self-help model through the ongoing empowerment of families, and the building of communities through its community development focus. In this way, the Queensland LAC model offers what we suggest may be considered the first *truly 21st century human service provision* — an integrated social capital building model that is based on trust and reciprocity, while at the same time enabling, empowering and developing families and the communities in which they live.

It is important to see the LAC model as working to building social capital within environments, communities and families that have: little or no support; fewer opportunities for education, employment and socialisation; fewer opportunities to seek financial support; fewer family networks; and, often, lack neighbours and friends. As such they are different from Australians interviewed by the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) in 2001, and reported on by Stone and Hughes (2001). This random study of over 1500 households, found that over 99 per cent had at least one friend, and most (94 per cent) knew at least one of their neighbours (p. 12). Our research, on the other hand, has found that having a child with a disability living in remote, rural or regional Queensland, and struggling to enable that child to have a quality of life, means that such a family is more likely to be disadvantaged, poor, undereducated and lack the important informal networks that research shows builds social capital. Where 85 per cent of the AIFS study respondents were members of one group or organisation, those parents interviewed as part of this evaluation, were likely *not* to belong to any groups other than those associated with their child's disability. The cultural imperialism discussed above was all too evident.

It is important to point out that civic action, which is a vital component of social capital, is often denied to these parents, as their energies are focussed internally, within the family, rather than externally toward the community. There is also the obvious and distressing fact that stigmatisation and ostracism still occur and in many communities, being different means being shunned. The AIFS study concluded that social cohesion “(a lack of inequalities) within communities also plays [an important role] in facilitating community cooperation and interaction” (p. 16) — in other words, it is not enough if families are working hard to develop their civic responsibilities, if the community in which they live then marginalises them *because* they have a child with a disability. This results in decreasing their reserves of social capital and their individual and collective resiliency. In this way, the role of the LAC and the Queensland LAC model is crucial in acting as a conduit between the family and the community thus building the TICB model. This means enabling the social capital linkages to develop, strengthening them if need be through some crucial community development activities, and then being there for the families when needed. The LAC Program provides the flexibility, resources and individual practitioner discretion to really make a difference and it also provides a unique model of innovation and partnership for the rest of Australia.

Early reflections on the TICB model

The Local Area Coordination program is just one example among many that offer alternatives to the current impasse in our understanding of the challenges for resiliency and capacity building. The Transformative and Innovative Community Building (TICB) model as described above has emerged from micro and macro research being conducted in Queensland. Ongoing research in Queensland and in Western Australia continues to provide additional evidence as to the robust structure of the model. In a macro sense, we have begun already to identify some ‘signs of times’ that give us hope that a transformative and alliance building movement is underway. The vitality needed, essential both for sustaining life as well as having power and persistent energy, appears to be emerging. We are seeing evidence of people taking up the challenges of diversity and sustainability and struggling to achieve ideals of inclusion and equity. For example, such building of alliances and partnerships between major interest groups is one important sign of the times. Recently, the National Farmers Federation and Australian Conservation Foundation collaboration for the ‘National Investment in Rural Landscapes’ broke new ground in alliance-building. While there has been downsizing in services (particularly in the banking sector), we can also see recent evidence of both large corporations (Telstra Country) and smaller businesses (Bendigo Bank) forming ‘partnerships’ with rural communities — with both acknowledging, and being appreciative of, the mutual advantage that will ensue. Such alliances show the potential for future integration of resources, ideas and visions. Additional alliance building is occurring at the local level, through the potential of the federal government’s Natural Heritage Trust. This federal government initiative is drawing together what some may consider ‘unlikely’ partners — large

international and national corporations, small community groups, such as local Indigenous elders, local government and landcare. While there remains much anxiety about the efficacy of such partnerships, nevertheless there is strong evidence of a take up the challenge to self-determine the future through regional governance strategies.

Despite the argument for the maintenance of partnerships between the non-government and public sectors of the community services industry, there remains an increasing tendency, framed within the market economy perspective, to see 'answers' in a fully privatised model of service delivery. We suggest that such models are based on economic assumptions about economies of scale and are denying the spatial dimension of the TICB model. It becomes difficult to argue for the retention of a small hospital in a small community if the only measure is an economic 'ruler'. Our research in alliance-building identifies the importance of the human service professional in working with their local community to resist the forces that push to homogenise and rationalise. Such alliance-building initiatives can also then provide a pathway to renewed altruism — reconnecting with the spirit of volunteerism that was once the backbone of the Australian community. The impact of the decade of change and crisis has challenged 'natural' bush altruism, and while there are some signs of resurgence in this area, this remains fragile. As the population ages, such volunteerism diminishes. We are aware of the potential in altruism, both philanthropic and personal. A future without this form of giving will be bleak indeed.

Conclusion

In concluding, we identify some of the forces that create a challenge to the operation of the TICB model within Australian communities. In the contemporary practice environment these forces are actively working against social capital and community capacity building, resiliency and sustainability. They can include: operating within a competition 'market' model of practice; budgetary constraints (particularly lack of flexibility within budgets); increasing use of technology in human services (in effect, losing the 'human' component of 'service'); globalisation and the demand to accept a 'one size fits all' approach to practice; and as an individual practitioner, being the 'meat in the sandwich' between competing policy/practice demands. These forces also challenge the notion of a spatial 'consciousness' by demanding universalism, homogenisation and economic 'bottom lines'. We are asked to make decisions for people that will result in their spatial dislocation. We need to begin to recognise this as cultural imperialism, and how spatial dislocation can quickly move to identity dislocation and thus oppression. The challenge for all of us working to build sustainable communities rests with our reflection on our practice and on our demanding a recognition of diversity and a resistance to oppression.

References

- Beer A, Bolam A & Maude A 1994, *Beyond the Capitals: Urban growth in regional Australia*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.
- Brown D D & Kulig J 1996–97, 'The concept of Resiliency: Theoretical Lessons from Community Research', in eds J Kulig & D D Brown, *Health and Canadian Society. Special Edition: Resiliency*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 29-52.
- Burkitt B & Ashton F 1996, 'The birth of the stakeholder society', *Critical Social Policy*, vol. 16, no. 4, pp. 3-16.
- Cheers B & Luloff A 2001, 'Rural Community Development', *Rurality Bites. The Social and Environmental Transformation of Rural Australia*, Pluto Press, Sydney, pp. 129-42.
- Chenoweth L & Stehlik D 2004, 'The implications of social capital for the inclusion of people with disabilities and families in community life', *International Journal on Inclusive Education*, vol. 8, no. 1, pp. 59-72.
- Chenoweth L & Stehlik D 2002, 'Using technology in rural practice – Local Area Coordination in rural Australia', *Rural Social Work*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 14-21.
- Chenoweth L & Stehlik D 2001, 'Building resilient communities: Social work practice and rural Queensland', *Australian Social Work*, vol. 54, no. 2, pp. 47-54.
- Chenoweth L & Stehlik D 1999, 'Interpreting Human Service Policy in Regional and Rural Queensland; The Practitioners' Perspective', *Just Policy*, vol. 15, pp. 21-8.
- Chenoweth L & Stehlik D 1997, 'Distance learning for human service workers: The experience of a community of learners', in ed. R Adams, *Crisis in the Human Services: National and International Issues*, University of Lincolnshire and Humberside, Kingston upon Hull, pp. 287-94.
- Collier K 1993, *Social Work with Rural Peoples: Theory & Practice*, 2 edn, New Star Books, Vancouver.
- Falk I 1997, 'Community learning: using learning to reconceptualise community well-being', in eds F Vanclay & L Mesiti, *Sustainability and Social Research*, Centre for Rural Social Research, Wagga Wagga, pp. 23-42.
- Herbert-Cheshire L 2001, *Governing Development: Discursive Practices of Self-help in Contemporary Rural Australia*, PhD thesis, Central Queensland University, Rockhampton.
- Ife J 1997a, 'The changing role of the state in the provision of human services in Australia', *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work*, vol. 7, no. 1, pp. 6-18.
- Ife J 1997b, 'Realising the Purpose of Social Work for Stakeholders – Maintaining the Vision and Making a Difference in a World of Change', Keynote Address, *25th AASW National*

Conference, *Social Work Influencing Outcomes*, 21-24 September, Canberra, Australian National University.

Ife J 2000, 'Community-based Options for Social Work: Sites for Creative Practice', in eds I O'Connor, J Warburton & P Smyth, *Contemporary Perspectives on Social Work and the Human Services: Challenges and Change*, Pearson Education Australia, Sydney, pp. 139-49.

Kulig J & Brown D D (eds) 1996-97, *Health and Canadian Society. Special Edition: Resiliency*, vol. 4, no. 1.

Lawrence G 1995, *Futures for Rural Australia: From Agricultural Productivism to Community Sustainability*, RSERC Press, Rockhampton.

Lawrence G, Stehlik D & Gray I n.d., 'Changing Spaces: The Effects of Macro-social Forces on Rural Australia', in eds B Kasimis & A Papadopoulos, *Local responses to global integration: Exploring the socio-economic aspects of rural restructuring*, Ashgate Publishing, London.

McKenzie F 1994, *Regional Population Decline in Australia: Impacts and Policy Implications*, Bureau of Immigration and Population Research, Canberra.

Saunders P 1994, *Welfare and inequality: national and international perspectives on the Australian welfare state*, Cambridge University Press, Melbourne.

Stehlik D & Lawrence G 1996, 'Rural Policy' A Contradiction in Terms? The Example of Aged Care Policy in Australia', *Journal of the Australian Studies Institute*, vol. 3, no. 1, pp. 91-108.

Stehlik D 2001, "'Out there': Spaces, places and border crossings', in eds S Lockie & L Bryant, *Rurality Bites: The Social and Environmental Transformation of Rural Australia*, Pluto Press, Sydney, pp. 31-41.

Stehlik D 1999, 'Developing a Rural Consciousness: Aged Care, Rural Health & Rural Well-Being for Sustainable Australian Communities', in eds W Ramp, J Kulig, I Townshend & V McGowan, *Health in Rural Settings: Contexts for Action*, University of Lethbridge, Lethbridge, Canada, pp. 143-62.

Stehlik D, Lawrence G & Gray I 1999, *Farm Families' Experience of the Drought of the 1990s: A Sociological Investigation*, Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation.

Stewart M, Reid G, Jackson S, Buckles L, Edgar W, Mangham C & Tilley N 1996-97, 'Community Resilience: Strengths and Challenges', in eds J C Kulig & D D Brown, *Health and Canadian Society. Special Edition: Resiliency*, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 53-82.

Stone W & Hughes J 2001, 'Social Capital. Linking family and community?', *Family Strengths Everybody's Business, Everybody's Gain Conference*, 2-5 December, Newcastle.

Stone W 2000, 'Social capital, social cohesion and social security', *Year 2000 International Research Conference on Social Security*, 25-27 September, Helsinki.

Western Australian Disability Services Commission 1998, Local Area Coordination Western Australia, unpublished report.

Yanow D 1993, 'The Communication of Policy Meanings: Implementation as Interpretation and Text', *Policy Sciences*, vol. 26, pp. 41-61.

Yeatman A 1994a, *Postmodern Revisionings of the Political*, Routledge, New York.

Yeatman A 1994b, 'Postmodern Epistemological Politics and Social Science', in eds K Lennon & M Whitford, *Knowing the Difference: Feminist Perspectives in Epistemology*, London, Routledge, pp. 187-202.

Yeatman A 1996, *Getting Real: The Final Report of the Review of the Commonwealth/State Disability Agreement. The Executive Summary*, Australian Government Publishing Service, Canberra.

Young I M 1989, 'Polity and Group Difference: A Critique of the Ideal of Universal Citizenship', *Ethics*, vol. 99, pp. 250-74.

Young I M 1990a, *Justice and the Politics of Difference*, Princeton University Press, Princeton.

Young I M 1990b, 'The Ideal of Community and the Politics of Difference', in ed. L J Nicholson, *Feminism/Postmodernism*, Routledge, New York and London, pp. 300-23.

Young I M 1994, 'Gender as Seriality: Thinking about Women as a Social Collective', *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, vol. 19, no. 3, Spring, pp. 713-38.