

NFP Funding for Community Development

Community development is one important area for the NFP sector and it involves substantial government funding. It is relevant to many social problems, for example

- alienation and resentment
- deterioration of health
- drug use, vandalism, violence and crime
- cultural and social division

This submission is about improving the contribution made by the NFP sector to community development.

Community development has many faces, but here I am thinking about two things

- that sense of neighbourhood, which many feel is being lost
- and 'social inclusion'

As we know, the bottom line for the Productivity Commission Enquiry Productivity into the NFP sector will be 'bang for the government buck'. Once the obvious NFP sector funding cuts have all been made, all the best accountability processes are in place and every 'efficiency' is achieved, the ongoing process of globalization and increasing competition will still require costs to continue to be cut.

Competition for Resources

As most of our competitors in the global economy would be satisfied to achieve even the basic things in Maslow's hierarchy of needs, this cost cutting will continue until the only one standing will be the one with the lowest costs. For those of us who already have the basics and aspire to objectives further up the hierarchy, any community development which continues to depend on government funding will be under increasing threat.

This means that the sustainability and growth of community development will have to be increasingly based on inputs that do not depend on more funding or on competitiveness.

Costless Inputs

Organisations in this sector will need to get out of the expensive business of taking on management responsibilities and costs. The old processes that transferred operations and responsibilities upwards until only a professional worker or a specialist volunteer could take them on will no longer be viable.

Community projects will need to simplify operations so they can be shared with unskilled volunteers who are willing to be held accountable for their role. They will need new processes to encourage cooperation and the sharing of responsibility between themselves. They will need to flourish without a professional worker to manage them, tie up loose ends or take up the slack.

Improved Community

Community requires a level of participation few people have time for these days and so many of us are already experiencing its loss.

Everyone could benefit from a restoration of community, but it would have great potential for improvement in daily life of people on the lowest incomes. With the number of unemployed set to rise, an increasing number of people face especially difficult barriers to paid employment and are socially excluded by unemployment.

Beyond remaining socially connected, relevant and valued, their greatest need is to stretch their dollars.

Mutual Benefits

Being on a low income, a realistic approach to development of new skills would be to start with the natural motivation to make low income living more rewarding and productive and to cooperate with others in any way that could help serve that purpose. Cooperative activities can expand skills and motivation and they increase socially inclusion.

Better processes – greater freedom

Typical projects are collaborative neighbourhood food gardening in private, public and common spaces, car sharing etc.. With the right processes, such local activities build community and this would be in the interests of all neighbours. But without a practical way to co-operate successfully, such motivation never gets off the ground. Hoped for social outcomes which might have further empowered the individual and the community are easily undermined, along with the government's economic objective of promoting greater financial independence and productivity.

Whether the individual's motivation is to make the most of a low income or to achieve financial independence, knowing just how to proceed to achieve what you need is fundamental to success.

We can be sure that income support for the lowest income group will have to rise, unlike funds for community development.

Removing an Obstacle

Within any community, the unemployed, especially the long term unemployed, are a largely untapped potential. Thankfully the importance of volunteers in the community sector is now better recognised and even encouraged through Centrelink and such volunteers are pleased to be accountable for the support they receive.

While Centrelink treads a fine line on its option for unemployed people to do voluntary work, it is my opinion that they could stay on the right side of the line. If voluntary work remains an option not a requirement, choosing voluntary work fundamentally will be an arrangement between the volunteer and the approved organisation. The volunteer and the organisation itself, not Centrelink, then determine the nature of the arrangement and whether it is working.

In the intimacy of community organisations like Lower Mountains Neighbourhood Centre, personal capacities and circumstances can be accounted for. An unwilling or uncommitted 'volunteer' could not maintain a mere pretence of sincerity. If someone is 'volunteering' for something that they don't sincerely want to do in a responsible way, this will very soon become clear to all concerned.

The challenge for the professional community worker is in learning how to empower communities and individuals with operating processes that are totally independent of their own professional involvement and are simple enough for even the casual volunteer to immediately be part of without training, expertise or off-putting procedures.

The initiation and running of things by community members, their ability to cooperate with each other, to progress and to succeed will thus be foundational to the role of the paid community worker.

Potential Assets, not liabilities

With access to an empowering community participation process and the right support from community workers, I believe that the outcomes from government investment in the community sector and in income and housing security for the unemployed can be significantly improved. Even if the result is not paid work, participants can be productive in the community and nature can reliably be left to take its course. Once

people are equipped with the means to be efficient and productive we can be sure that for the most part they will look to improving their 'returns'.

We could all benefit from new skills in planning, accountability and for a sustainable way forward to ensure the value, success and security of the investment we all have in the future.

Efficiency and Sustainability

In addition to the heavy investment already committed to in this area, government is now also committed to addressing climate change. Out of economic necessity, low income people are already strongly motivated to make the most of activities that are much more local and less demanding on resources – a conservative lifestyle. Clearly new ways of living are needed, especially by those on the lowest incomes who have the highest motivation to find a better way.

Evaluation

I believe this proposal for community empowerment would make the current dollars work harder by making personal empowerment and social inclusion part of the solution.

I would like to see this specific type of volunteering evaluated by the productivity commission enquiry because I think there is very much more potential for the community, the volunteer and the NFP sector in expanding opportunities for participation. In fact I am sure that such an evaluation would show that the opportunity for should be extended beyond those unemployed people who are over 55 to include the under 55's.

For information about the economic viability of this reform, please contact
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