

# Community Building



The Solution Network Australia  
Foundation



# For Communities that wish to experience real change in a way that builds on existing skills and abilities...

**“We must become the change we want to see.”**  
Mahatma Gandhi

It is well recognised that cities around the world face similar problems when we consider their future development. City hearts have stopped beating, problems of crime, and a whole generation of people that have little vision for the future. These are common pictures seen around the world. Many programs have tried to address these problems with little long-term sustainable outcomes.

It is important to remember however that hundreds of cities in Europe, Asia and North America have addressed these issues in a very positive way. The key, I think, to successful sustainable development is giving people, such as you and I, the power to be involved in the vision and the planning of the future of cities.

Most government or aid programs have a very short focus, most less than three years. This is primarily due to the Western government's political cycle of election-govern-election. Many politicians are pressured by constituents to support projects that may have little real outcomes due to this cycle.



To make a real difference in communities, that is turn it around requires a generation of 20 years or more. As a consequence a lot of short-term projects that are not community focused have little long-term discernible benefit.

There is evidence in many cities of spending, sometimes millions of dollars, on facilities that are not utilised adequately by the community due to lack of community empowerment. This type of project is popular however with some governments as the project has a definite beginning and end that can be adequately supported within the funding cycle.



Most major changes in cities have been experienced when the community has recognised the problems and develop solutions themselves. It is very rare for solutions to be found from the top down approach. As an example Chattanooga, Tennessee, in the 1970s was known as “dirty depressing nowhere-ville”. Vacant factories and warehouses lined the banks of the Tennessee River. It was clearly in decline and the cities residents seemed to lack little interest in community affairs. In the early 1980s a few dozen residents became concerned about the direction in which the city was going and began an informal dialogue. From this humble beginning a community of empowerment process began, involving the community, civic leaders, commercial enterprises, hospitality and others this has transformed Chattanooga into one of America's most liveable cities.

Over the years I have talked to many groups about community development and partnership. I have always looked for opportunities to form partnerships with different groups or individuals. When I examine my motives however, I find that what I really wanted from a partnership was for the partner to fund or provide materials for me to undertake my particular activity. I wanted to use someone else's resource for my gain. There was very little I expected to give as a result of my receiving the resource in question and I certainly did not want any conditions put on me by the giver. I think this a common situation with 'not for profit' organisations. A community's development depends on adequate and effective partnership between governments, community and the private sector but if there is this underlying suspicion between each other how can we expect things to be successful?

Partnership is defined as being associated with a partner. Associate is defined as being a companion or comrade. So in essence partnership implies we have a very close relationship. In some ways it is like a successful marriage, both partners gain from the relationship and both willingly give something away. In most community partnerships there would be a great suspicion if it became evident that one of the partners could be making money out of the relationship. In community partnerships if the giver can also benefit, financially or otherwise, from the relationship then that helps with the sustainability of the initiative.

A large number of organisations concentrate their efforts on short term activities and usually spend little thought to the long term benefit. This can be seen in the way aid agencies and aid programs concentrate on outputs, i.e. people trained, buildings built, but they have little interest in the outcomes or benefits of the activity. For long term sustainable transformation in a community we must reflect on what we can do better by looking at outcomes not outputs.

Sustainability is one of the key factors affecting community transformation. How many times have projects been started with a great idea and much enthusiasm only to see it falter a few months later? Surely we have more responsibility than that to do things right. But this is found to be true for small organisations as well as large government run programs.



## Healthy Relationships



One important concept to work on to achieve positive community development is the notion of mutual respect and common goal. These two are known as the two basics of community development and are the keys for successful outcomes. Organisations such as the World Bank see these factors as been so crucial that when they examine the potential of a programme to succeed they examine to see if these qualities are within the consortium of people working on the programme. Unless they can see these qualities they will not support or fund the activities with the consortium.

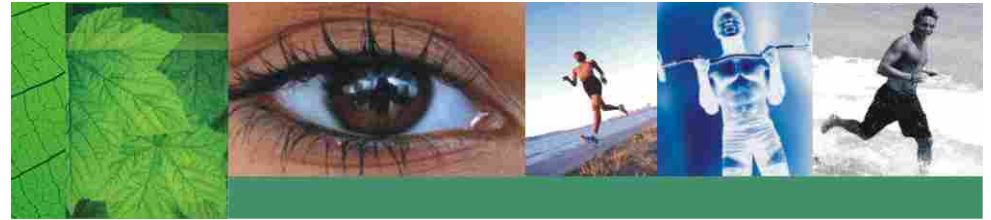
An example of this not working very well can be seen in many Aboriginal communities. I once worked on a community in Australia where the youth suicide rate was close to 18 suicides per year. This was for a population of less than 1500 people. This was obviously not a sustainable situation when many of its young people were dying from suicide. I was visiting one day when it was discovered that a teenager had committed suicide; he was laid on the side of the road when the police and the ambulance arrived at the scene.

The normal procedure would be to take the boy to the hospital in the ambulance where he would be certified as dead and then placed in the mortuary. This day his body was collected in a body bag and then laid in the back of the hearse. As the idea of a hearse is to be able to view the coffin it therefore makes a bad choice of vehicle to use as a substitute ambulance. Obviously the whole community already traumatised by his death was distressed even further by seeing young boy's body shape rolling about on the back of a hearse as it moved on down the uneven road. This act showed little or no mutual respect for the people of that community.



**And in the end, it's not the years in your life that count... It's the life in your years.**

**Abraham Lincoln**



It was interesting to see in this population of nearly 1500 people that there were 42 government departments working there from State and Federal agencies. Each of these departments worked independent of the community and also each other, showing me that there was no common goal. So using this community as an example of what goes on around the world. It is obvious that no matter how much money and resources you put into a community without these fundamentals in place, nothing will work.

The traditional approach to community development is needs based. Working in communities we talk in terms of undertaking a 'needs' analysis. Every consultant in 'the industry' would have undertaken many of these. In simple terms we look at the situation as it is now and work out what 'we' think it should be like and define the need as the gap between the two.

This is not a complicated process, but it takes someone, usually an outside consultant with more insight into the community than others in the community, to identify these gaps. They then prioritise the needs, depending on the briefing given by the donor/government department.

The process then requires a project to be written, usually with a life of 12-18 months, and it is then implemented. A number of outputs are assigned to the project so it can be written up as a success at the completion of the project, they then move on to the next project.

The problem with this process is by concentrating on the needs of the community it is portrayed to the people of the community that they and their community are somehow deficient. This also creates the impression that they are unable to take control of their future. Reliance on needs as an exclusive guide to resource gathering ensures the cycle of dependence; problems must be worse than last year or more intractable if funding is to be renewed.

The main problem with needs is that it focuses on deficiencies and makes people consumers of services and builds dependency. It is possible to see this phenomenon around the country in many communities and in particular indigenous ones. Strength based activities however focus on effectiveness, what is good and seeks to empower people and build interdependencies within the group.

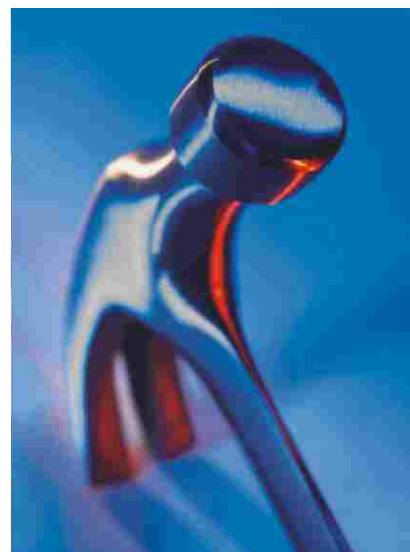
The key to strength based development is mapping the capacities and strengths of the local people and the organisations and then use this as a reservoir of resources available to address any particular issues of local concern. It is possible to then to collaboratively address issues of importance to the community.

This strength based approach is quite different from the normal deficit approach. We can see this difference by examining the two models. The deficit model is when we focus on only the problems in a community. By just looking at the community's problems we raise problems usually without giving solutions. This creates negative expectations within the community and as a result of this, opportunities for development are blocked. People then have a negative experience with the organisation and the programme being offered, leading to lower expectations as to what the programme can achieve. This results in negative behaviour and this cycle continues over and over again. It is no wonder why we have such a negative outcome in communities taking this approach.

The competency model however is quite different we still have the same problems but we approach it in a different way. We first look at what are the strengths that we have in our community that we can build on. While we are recognising people strengths this creates a positive expectation of activities going on in the community. This positive expectation opens up

opportunities for development in the community and people have a positive experience. These positive experiences create high expectations within the community and as the process builds we can develop competencies within the organisations and the people within. This cycle like the deficit model continues but has a much better outcome long term than the deficit model.

When we look at community issues or problems we tend to be very programmatic in what we do. We look at one issue such as homelessness and recognise agencies that are all working, not necessarily together, to try to find solutions to homelessness.



When the only tool you own is a hammer, every problem begins to resemble a nail.


Abraham H Maslow



The work the agencies do is very reactive, we see a problem and we try to find a solution to the problem. This is the traditional approach to issues in our community but it does not fix the problem but acts in some way as a Band-Aid.

If we look at the cycle of this reactive type approach it does receives some positive outcomes as a result of the 'activity' but we also see some young people who relapse back into the system. There is also a whole group of the people who have grown up with the same social economic peer pressures similar to the first group, which continues to maintain this reservoir of problems. The obvious outcome of the cycle is that the problem never goes away and only gets steadily bigger. The reactive model therefore is one to be used when we don't want to 'fix' the problem in anyway.

In reality what we need to reduce the problem is to have a proactive model and a reactive model working together. Let's put it this way, how can we as a community, work with the child that is born today at the local hospital, to input into the child's life positive things so we can reduce the number of new young people coming into the system? We obviously need the reactive model but it must be balanced with the proactive model.



I believe one of the biggest hindrances to effective community development is the fact that most organisations involved with development do not see themselves as part of a community. They talk in terms of 'doing a project' in the community. This implies that they are doing it from an outside perspective and not from one working within. This is commonly seen in government agencies and many non-government organisations, churches and others. Quite often we try to create a community that fits to our own philosophy or ideals. We try to exclude organisations and individuals who do not think the same way as we do. The reality is that we can't change the make up of the community where we are living.

It's an interesting exercise when you put in the middle of a piece of paper the name of a problem, such as homelessness. Around that, you write all the people and organisations within the community that would have an interest in that issue or problem. You may find perhaps 35 to 40 groups that would directly impact that issue. The difficulty comes when you try and remove groups and individuals from the list purely because they do not think or do things the same way as you do. This is a scenario we find all the time in communities around the world. We must become inclusive and build as a community not as an exclusive organisation or individual working alone.

I think it is so important to create community vision. When we live in cities and communities around the world people make the vision for us, local councils have 20 visionary processes in place. The problem is that most visions for the future are based around the development of infrastructure. Where do we want roads in the next 20 years? Where should that new hospital be, and other such concerns? The problem is that if future vision is based solely around the development of infrastructure we end up with crass commercialism. Commercial development must be tempered with the social development and social position.

When I think of creating a community vision I do not think of a plan for the day to day running of an organisation, I think of where do we want to be in 20 years? It is well recognized that for community transformation to take place, to see real change, that not only transforms communities from a commercial basis but also transforms the population, we need a generation to change. So we have to be looking in terms of 20 years for a vision to take place.



Working Together

Giving Change Time



Achieving Together

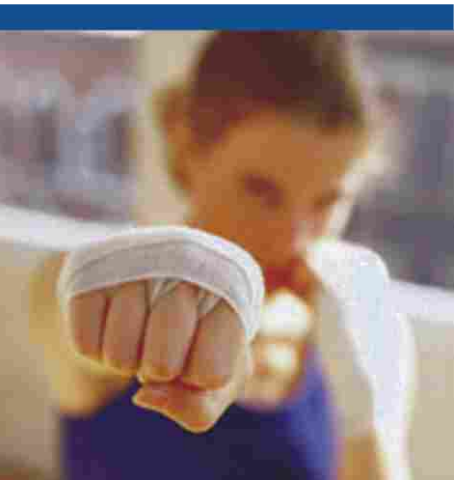


A 20 year vision for a community is sometimes difficult for a government to envisage. When one is dependent on budgetary processes, providing information to constituents and getting an outcome for your investment made, it is difficult to look beyond a two-year

The people, who are capable of making a vision of the future that encompasses all the hopes and aspirations of its community, are the community. So it is important to be able to give communities the opportunity to create this vision.

If we look at our community vision as a backbone that keeps a community together we can look at projects from all different organisations being like ribs attaching and strengthening that backbone. These ribs may be an activity that just lasts for one day but the outcome is significant provided it is working to achieve that vision.

Communities are going through many issues at present; quite a lot of these are associated with the breakdown of the family. Many of the problems we have as a nation and as individuals will diminish if we encourage positive communities and families. Just having a community vision of building families over the next 20 years, could be a major step forward in the community's development. This simple vision implies safety; it also implies a friendly environment and a community that builds young people instead of tearing them down. This has to have a positive long-term outcome for communities in general.

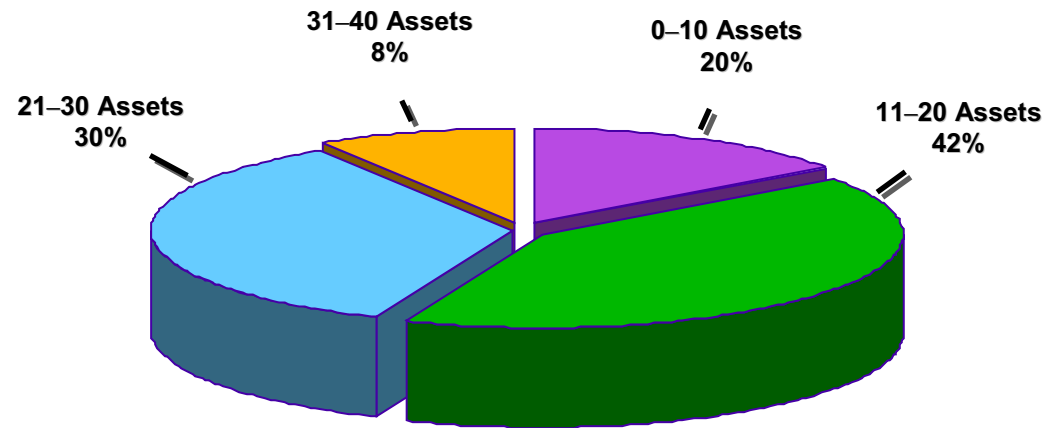


Some research undertaken over a 15 to 20 year period by the Search Institute in Minneapolis found that in a typical community a child could have 40 assets or positive things influencing their life. Assets should not be thought of as a commercial or financial item but it is one of a positive influence in a child's life. They divide the 40 assets into eight categories; support, empowerment, boundaries and expectations, constructive use of time, commitment to learning, positive values, social

*Personal relationships are the fertile soil from which all advancement, all success, all achievement in real life grows.*

Ben Stein American Professor, Writer

confidences and positive identity. Of the 40 assets recognised the following distribution of assets was found in a typical community.



n = 100 000

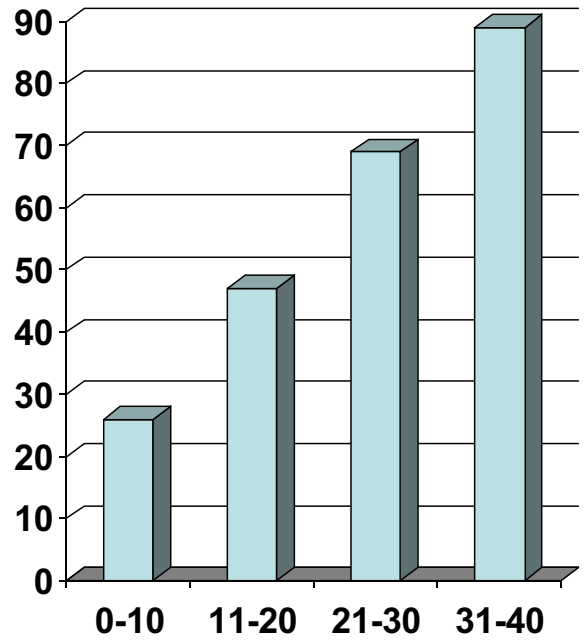
Here 100,000 young people survey to assess how many assets they had in their lives. 20% of the young people had only between zero and ten positive influences in their life. The other groups can be seen in the above illustration. Obviously what we need in a successful community are as many people as possible in the 21 to 40 asset group. This means we have to do something urgently with 62% of young people with less than 20 assets in their life.

A list of the 40 assets can be found at:  
<http://www.search-institute.org/assets/40AssetsList.pdf>



It is interesting to see that this distribution of assets does not change when one looks at different communities around the world. So what does this all mean and how does it affect young people? When we deal with problems in communities we tend to be very programmatic. We see a problem and we make a program to fix it. You can see by the following graphs which illustrate the positive effect that could happen to young people when you start building assets in their life. These graphs illustrate a variety of aspects of a young person's life. They show the percentage of the total number of young people in each asset group listed above, i.e. 0-10, 11-20 etc.

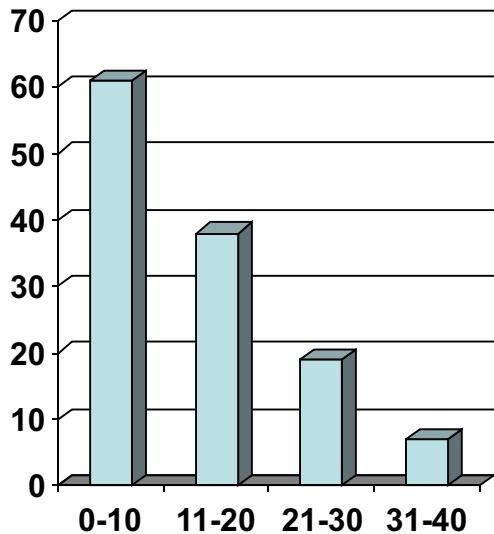
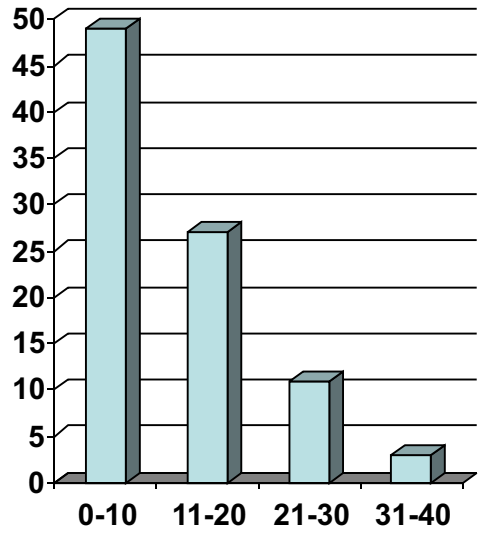
Take the maintenance of good health.



Here we see only 25% of these young people having less than ten assets in their life i.e. taking good care of their body (such as eating foods that are healthy and exercising regularly). So instead of being reactive and programmatic by saying we need to find a program to tackle childhood obesity or the like.

We need to be proactive with the whole community inputting positive things into our children's lives and see long term change take place.

Another common problem area is alcohol use and problems with violence, the following graphs illustrate a similar trend to that seen above. The graph on the left illustrates that almost 50% of the group with less than ten assets in their life have used alcohol three or more times in the past 30 days or got drunk once or more in the past two weeks. Whilst the graph on the right illustrates over 60% of the same group have engaged in three or more acts of fighting, hitting, injuring a person, carrying a weapon or threatening physical harm in the past 12 months. Again we can be reactive as a community or be proactive; the latter would have the most long-term effects.



There are many more equally startling graphs to indicate the benefits of being proactive in communities. It is also interesting to look at how many assets or positive inputs an individual organisation in the community can contribute. Most can only contribute one or two assets. It does not matter therefore how big the programme is or how much money is spent unless groups work together with the rest of the community. They should all contribute building into the various assets if anything is to be achieved.

Developing positive assets in young person's life is only one of many ways to improve outcomes in our community. Regardless of which process you use the key thing to remember is to work together. Surely that is the least we can do for the future of our community and our young people.