Case Study 3: The Central Coast Community Congress – using a strength based approach in regional community development

Background

This case study is about how a change in the focus of community development work at a regional level – from a needs or deficit focus to an asset or strength focus – has begun to change both the culture and the outcomes of this work in local communities.

It encompasses three major themes:
1. Celebration
2. Co-operation, and
3. Learning.

The context is the Central Coast of New South Wales, a region that has experienced rapid urban expansion and population growth over the past two decades. This is a region people move to in search of affordable housing near the beach. Then they spend most of their waking hours commuting to and from Sydney for work. Like many regions on the coast of Australia and not too far from a capital city, the Central Coast is a place that attracts people who are looking for a place to bring up young children, and people who are looking for a place to retire to. Both ends of the demographic spectrum are over-represented, and infrastructure and services have struggled to meet demand.

The Central Coast is also a place where community-building work has been done for most of that time, and where a shift has occurred over the past 5 years in the way community builders, both professional community development workers and local community members, are doing that work.

Notions of community and community development have played an important part in social planning and policy in the region. Questions such as “How do new residents in an area develop and experience a sense of belonging?”, “What happens to older, smaller communities in the face of rapid expansion?”, “How does community infrastructure (such as neighbourhood centres) contribute to community identity and local networks?”, have been common themes in local and regional planning processes (see Gosford City Community Plan 2002, Wyong Shire Community Plan 2002, Shaping the Central Coast 1999).

The shift to a strengths based approach

If you had listened to the conversations that were taking place amongst community workers and community builders on the Central Coast of New South Wales five years ago, and then were to listen again now, you would hear some very different ideas about how to build strong communities, who should be involved, and what a strong and healthy community looks like.

Five years ago much of the conversation followed the themes of many rapidly growing urban fringe and regional areas in Australia. An alarming array of statistical and anecdotal information was discussed regularly: it described high child notification rates, high unemployment, record youth suicide, economically disadvantaged communities, low levels of education, social isolation, family and community breakdown.

The objectives of these discussions were, first, to convince government at all levels to allocate more resources to the Central Coast because the need was so high, and second, following on from this, to develop more services to address the needs that had been so clearly articulated.
People on the Central Coast were experts in telling and retelling the story of crisis, of unmet need, of social and economic deficit. It is a story that has a substantial body of evidence to justify its telling. Whether it was an interview with the Mayor on a local radio station, a community meeting, a newspaper article, a local or state government strategic planning process, or a chat over a beer down at the club, the themes were the same. The Coast is in trouble. Why won’t anyone listen?

About five years ago, a group of people who both lived and worked on the Central Coast began a conversation about this story.

This was a group of people who worked in human services, either for government agencies or in the community sector. As a result, they were often viewed as important advocates and problem-solvers for the Central Coast. The discussion took place at an interagency meeting and was in many ways accidental. Its content and results were pivotal.

This group of people had become increasingly frustrated about what they felt was the ineffectiveness of their work, and of the work of the human services sector on the Central Coast in general. They had noticed a number of things that concerned them deeply:

1. In spite of the increasingly clear and evidence-based articulation of the problems and disadvantage experienced by communities on the Central Coast, the level of resources coming to the region had not increased in any significant way.

2. The retelling of the story of social need on the Central Coast had had some unintended consequences for both local service providers and the communities they served. A culture of secrecy and competition had developed between local human service providers on the Central Coast. As funding was limited, often piecemeal and/or short term, organisations had become desperate to gain their share of the small pie. In this environment, co-operation between organisations was almost unheard of. Just as advocates for the Central Coast were competing fiercely to gain ‘most disadvantaged in the State’ status for the region, local service providers were competing to establish their particular locality or target group as the ‘most needy’. In the communities where these service providers worked, individuals, families and groups were becoming increasingly narrowly defined as targeted client groups dependent on the service system to get by.

3. The sustained and exclusive focus in their work on problems, crises and deficits had not assisted them or the people they were working with to solve those problems/crises/deficits in any substantial or self-sustaining way.

4. The way people were working and living on the Central Coast, waiting for the magic pudding of funding to arrive from Sydney or Canberra before they could act, had resulted in both workers and communities giving away their power to improve life on the Central Coast.

Overall, there was agreement amongst the group that what they had been doing so far wasn’t really working and that they wanted to try something new. They were an ambitious group and agreed that they also wanted to work towards a culture change on the Central Coast, a culture change that could be felt from grassroots voluntary community groups through to State and Federal government departments.

The conversation took a turn to action. The group decided to concentrate on four themes and to model a new way of working themselves as the starting point. The group wanted to have an impact both with local communities and at a regional level.

The themes were co-operation, learning from each other, celebrating good community building stories on the Central Coast and encouraging local communities to work with all of their members in order to get stronger. The group called their project The Central Coast Community Congress.
This conversation has resulted in a quiet revolution getting underway. The aim now is to change the social policy and practice framework in that region from the ground up.

The Congress Working Party developed two major areas of activity:

1. A conference that takes place every two years as a catalyst for learning, celebration and reflection on the strengths based community development work taking place in the region and further afield. This conference is designed to be affordable for everyone and combines the input of keynote speakers with workshops and presentations from local community-builders and projects.

2. The development of resources and training to help groups who want to put this approach to the test in their own communities. The Congress Working Party has developed a Tool Kit for local communities that takes them through the steps that will let them identify and mobilise local assets and strengths to improve community life. There has also been training for service providers and community members on strengths based community development, and a website is being developed as a further resource for those interested in this work.

The first Congress conference, held in 2002, attracted over 200 people; the second saw the numbers swell to over 300. Congress 2006 continues this work, and hopes to again bring people together to learn and to take that learning back to their communities.

The Tool Kit will be reviewed in 2006 and new resources developed.

**What a strengths based approach means in this context**

In this context, a strengths based approach means paying attention to what is working in local communities and creating opportunities for community members and community development workers to identify and mobilise local strengths and assets to work on the things that are priorities for that community.

Through the Central Coast Community Congresses, community groups have had an opportunity to come together, showcase the way local strengths were being used for improving community life, and learn about using a strengths based approach in a range of different contexts.

**Benefits and challenges**

**Benefits**

The benefits of this project have been:

- Increased co-operation amongst people (paid and unpaid) doing community development work on the Central Coast.
- Creating a culture of learning for everyone interested in community development in the region.
- Having an opportunity to develop leadership in communities as community members drive local projects and present those projects at the Congresses.
- Discovering untapped assets on the Central Coast, both regional and local, and the mobilisation of these assets to attract more resources to community projects. These included everything from local people renovating and re-energising a neglected hall to an Aboriginal group developing a community garden in partnership with the local school, to the development of a festival that has expanded economic, social and cultural activities in a suburban community.
- Developing practical ways in which local people can work towards a community where all members are valued.
Challenges

The major challenges have been:

- Developing a sustainable resource base for the Congress to continue its work. This has been established to some degree, with both Gosford and Wyong Councils committing ongoing funds, but further work needs to be done.

- Developing a broad-based structure for the management of the Congress into the future. As the process is still evolving, this remains in development. The Congress currently has no formal structure, only a working party that co-ordinates the project. This has been a strength to date, but it needs to be re-examined over time.

- Shifting the mindset from needs to strengths: it has been, and continues to be, a slow process. Misunderstandings about the strengths based approach (primarily that it pretends disadvantage does not occur or that problems don’t exist) remain, and discussions about tackling problems in a different way, not ignoring them, will continue.

Outcomes

The concrete outcomes for the project have been:

- The establishment of a unique biennial event that attracts hundreds of people to learn about and celebrate community-building activities.

- The development of tools and resources for communities wanting to do some of this work for themselves.

- A groundswell of activity in a number of Central Coast communities who have put these ideas into action at a local level. Strengths-based community development projects are currently taking place in at least nine different communities across Gosford and Wyong. These projects are driven by partnerships between local people, service providers and businesses, with the aim of building communities from the inside out.

- A change in the language and approach of many human service providers, from seeing communities as filled with need to seeing them as filled with assets.

- Reports from a range of communities about increased participation in local activities by a more diverse group of people (many of whom had previously not participated in any community activity), the development of skills and enterprises by community members, and stronger relationships between community members and other stakeholders in the community (businesses and service providers).

The future

The Central Coast Community Congress is now seven years old, with three large events, resources and training under its belt. The future for this project is to develop a broader membership for the Working Party, expand the training work further, and look at creating more opportunities for communities to share ideas and work together from a strengths-based approach.

The development of the Congress website, www.communitycongress.org, as a place for discussion, information and showcasing projects is one arm that will develop further. Another is support for a range of local projects that have developed between Congresses.

For more information visit www.communitycongress.org