

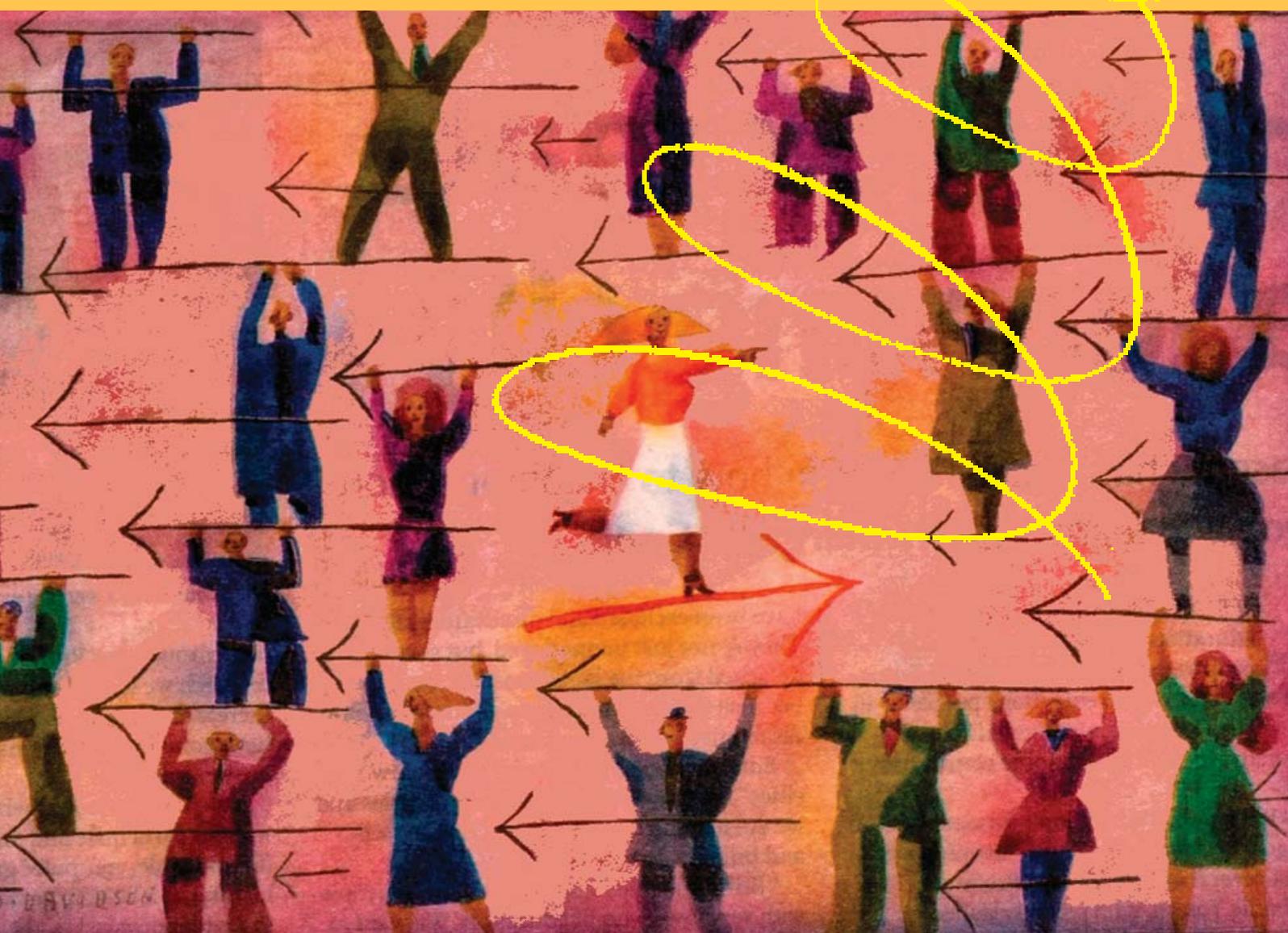


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# Community Manifesto

Valuing Australia's Community Groups

Communities in Control



The Community Manifesto - Valuing Australia's Community Groups

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Dear Colleagues,

Community Groups stand on the threshold of a revolution. Increasingly the public and Governments are recognising the enormous impact strong community groups can have on the health and wellbeing of our towns and regions.

At the same time, community groups remain under-resourced and vulnerable. They need more than rhetoric - they need to be valued and supported in the work they do. This manifesto is not a magic pill or intended to proclaim solutions. It is an attempt to identify and clarify issues arising out of the 2003 Communities in Control conference. It seeks to define the issues facing Australia's community groups and the challenges that need to be overcome if they are to be supported in developing the social capital needed to create a better Australian society.

Its purpose is to stimulate, to provoke, and to begin to mobilise community groups across Australia towards a common agenda.

We hope it will fertilise discussions and inspire new initiatives and we encourage every group and network of groups to add, take out, rewrite, create and most importantly, circulate it as widely as possible.

Please use the ideas in this document as if you were connecting the dots between the society we have and the vision of the society you wish to see.

We would greatly appreciate your thoughts on these issues and your comments on the manifesto. Send them to [service@ourcommunity.com.au](mailto:service@ourcommunity.com.au) or to C/O CIC Manifesto, Our Community, 51 Stanley St, West Melbourne, 3003.

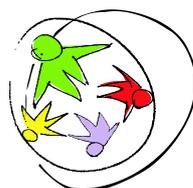
Regards

Rhonda Galbally AO  
Our Community

Fr Joe Caddy  
Catholic Social Services

Co-convenors of the inaugural Communities in Control Conference

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## The Context

Over the past 20 years evidence has been accumulating that the health of individuals and communities alike depends on the strength of their ties with the many associations and organisations that shape civil society. The work of researchers such as Emeritus Professor Len Syme (School of Public Health at the University of California, Berkeley) and Professor Lisa Berkman (Professor of Public Policy and Epidemiology and Chair of the Department of Health and Social Behavior at the Harvard School of Public Health) indicates that wellbeing springs from involvement in community groups connected by common interests able to set their own priorities and agenda.

Presently 700,000 community sector organisations in this country generate social capital for Australia, but these organisations are under-resourced and vulnerable. A new agenda is required that will place communities in control - valuing and reinforcing them in reality, not just rhetoric.

## The 2003 Communities in Control Conference

Professors Len Syme and Lisa Berkman were brought to Australia as the inaugural Pratt Fellows to address a conference on Communities in Control held in May 2003. It had been hoped that the conference would attract 200 participants; in the end there were over 1300 (one of the largest community conferences of its kind in Australia.) The enthusiasm of the participants demonstrated a clear need for a new understanding and appreciation of community groups. These groups need to be supported to set their own priorities, design their own approaches, and create their own solutions.

## Why a Manifesto

This Manifesto encapsulates the agenda that emerged from the Communities in Control conference. The Manifesto attempts to identify the key drivers of change for the sector and to mobilise Australia behind valuing not-for-profit groups as the life-force of local communities.

This Manifesto recognises the enormous importance of these groups not just through platitudes and rhetoric, but through policies and resources that can assist these organisations to grow, prosper and continue to build social capital. It does not attempt to answer the problems, but to identify and address the key issues that need to be acted on if community groups are to operate at their best in a supportive political, social and economic environment where people feel in control of decisions about the sort of community they want to live in.

The problems cannot be answered in one simple document - they are issues for all of us to address in the most suitable way, relative to our position, role and capacity within society.

## A New Vision of Community

Community groups stand on the threshold of a revolution. While the obstacles are substantial, today we have visions of a better society that can become real and meaningful in the future. Such visions are necessary to challenge an insidious doctrine that suggests we have no choices, no capacity to change the course of history and are instead predestined to continue as we are.

For many, this sense of powerlessness translates into hopelessness. The pace of change caused by major worldwide social, technological and economic revolutions leaves many people feeling shocked and traumatised. It is hardly surprising that people feel passive and out of control. And in the face of this redefinition of such basic questions as what is possible, who we are, and what we are on earth for, talk of the virtues of community groups is often seen as mere “feelgood” rhetoric without any practical use.

Many policymakers do little more than give lip service to community while in practice bypassing, neglecting or downplaying actual community organisations. This is remarkably short-sighted. Community groups support people to achieve shared visions, experiences and outcomes. They are the bedrock on which better societies will be built.

Community groups are the practical means of generating social connectedness (social capital) and community networks. These social relations have a huge impact on economic and social innovation, as well as on people’s health and wellbeing.

In the health area, for example, Professor Berkman of Harvard University told the Communities in Control conference:

*“Community organisations have the power to tangibly improve population health. In this case, what’s good for individuals and what’s good for the community is the same thing. Those with the most social connectedness, i.e. who have a high level of participation in social and community organisation and networks, have lower mortality rates.....Community groups are the engines that drive our ability to change behaviour, reduce morbidity, expand life-expectancy and innovate change”.*

Apart from promoting sustainable health and wellbeing, community groups play many other roles in society, such as:

- Giving voice both to local community groups and groups brought together by a common interest to contribute to a more involved Australian democracy;
- Ensuring that resources meant for communities reach them;
- Improving the quality of life through shared interactions, events, and celebrations;
- Providing a place for people to participate and engage with each other in community life;
- Breaking down isolation and enabling people from a wide diversity of backgrounds to join up and join in;
- Providing the opportunity for people to join together to share responsibility;
- Identifying and embodying the needs, desires, motivations, opinions and contributions of Australian communities;
- Providing services that are responsive, relevant, and accountable to their communities, and that are thus more likely to succeed.

## Community Sector Overview

- An estimated 700,000 Australian community organisations operate in Australia. The vast majority of these have budgets under \$1 million and operate at the grassroots level.
- 65 per cent of all Australians over the age of 14 belong to one or more community groups.
- Community organisations contribute 3.3 percent to Australia's gross domestic product (GDP).
- Community organisations provide employment for over 600,000 Australians. Australia's not-for-profit sector represents 6.8 percent of the labour force and almost 12 percent of private employees.
- Community Volunteering contributes an estimated \$42 billion a year to the Australian economy.
- Non-profit organisations have approximately 30 million memberships (because many of Australia's 20 million people belong to several organisations).

## Who We Are: Our Dual Identities

Community groups do not exist in a vacuum. They are influenced by such macro-level forces as the current obsession with economic drivers, an obsession that has led to a focus on markets and an intolerance of differing views and voices.

The reality is that in Australia we live in a duality of markets and networks. This dual identity is central to understanding the importance of community groups in our society.

As an OECD report on the knowledge economy notes:

*“Our world is more than a collection of buyers and sellers, producers and consumers; we are also people that depend on learning, trust, and knowing each other in order to discover our identity and build the communities we desire” (OECD, 1996: 24)*

We are all buyers and sellers, participants in a global market economy. For many, this means individual rewards and incentives and an abundance of things to buy. This buyer-and-seller economy has also brought in its wake a society that tends to reduce the human condition to the bottom line, social worth to the size of one's wallet, satisfaction to a quick consumer high, and social problems to personal failure.

However, we are all also collaborators, team players, and community participants, and in that role we have another chance.

We all belong to multiple, overlapping, fluid networks. The most significant of these are first, our family and second, our workplace. We may be members of families that support personal development and enhance the social and economic contribution of their members, we may be members of families that are isolated, lonely and toxic, or we may live somewhere in between. We may, like over one in ten adult Australians, live alone.

We may be employed in workplaces that are grappling with notions of worker participation and control, or we may be in workplaces that are hierarchical and authoritarian, or we may again face something in between. However, the decision about what to produce will in most cases be made by those who own the production process, and even within the most participative workplace control over outcomes is often severely limited.

And we may, like many Australians, be underemployed or unemployed.

## The Third Chance

There is, however, a third network. Sixty-five percent of us play a role in community organisations as members, friends, volunteers, Board or committee members, or workers.

Community organisations at their best provide participants with a third chance. They allow people to be in a group that can work better than most families or workplaces. Shoulder to shoulder, community group members develop, design, advocate, play, learn, support, protect, build, create, entertain, and care, to name just a few of the activities they carry out. Whether it's fighting fires, for example, or sewing quilts, lobbying for rights, competing in games, learning and teaching new skills, painting community halls, looking after our natural environment, planting trees, putting on a show, celebrating anniversaries, worshipping in prayer, supporting each other, offering advice and assistance or providing residential services - community groups in Australia offer an amazing list of possibilities.

Some community groups are around the corner in the neighbourhood, some are nationwide, some are international, and some are virtual.

At their worst, community groups are inward, exclusive, elitist, hierarchical, and clogged up with the same old faces. They can be racist, sexist, ageist, able-bodiedist, homophobic, and exclude new blood and new visions. These groups do not support the development of social capital, nor do they promote an authentic wellbeing that can be shared and celebrated.

What Australia lacks is social policy that focuses on the value of community networks and groups. What is needed is social policy that acknowledges the central importance of inclusive, participatory community groups and gives some indication of how they will be supported.

## The Communities in Control Manifesto

This manifesto is only a starting point. It raises some key issues that need to be resolved and acted on in order for community groups to succeed and to operate at their best in a supportive political, social and economic environment.

This manifesto is a collective document, put together as an output of the conference in a bid to spark discussion among community groups and, most importantly, among those who develop public policy affecting community organisations.

The task we face is to structure, support and mobilise Australia's not-for-profit community group networks so that there is a greater capacity to probe beneath the surface of ill-health and social problems, understand their deeper root causes, and act to prevent them. In order to do this ways must be found to convert our understanding into effective collective action.

Our collective efforts can achieve "big picture" outcomes such as safe, healthy, and learning communities, and community groups can become respected as the social and political tour de force they are. Whether we succeed in this will depend on how we tackle the challenges identified in this Manifesto.

*These ten challenges emerge from three broad areas where the current situation of Australian community groups have led to problems that need leadership, commitment and resources for their resolution.*

## Action Challenges

### **Challenge 1. Research**

Australia needs a well-funded socio-epidemiological capacity to generate good-quality large-cohort data at the local level (and this research must involve research subjects in decisions about its use).

### **Challenge 2. Assessment and Evaluation**

Community groups should be assessed on their own and their aggregated contribution to participants, consumers, the sector, and society rather than on narrow input-output criteria.

### **Challenge 3. Participation**

Community groups should be supported to reach out to new populations to expand, revive and refresh and diversify their membership.

### **Challenge 4. Governance and Learning**

Community Group Boards need to regularly overhaul themselves to balance safety with dynamism. To maintain their relevance and legitimacy and learning, Boards should reflect the diversity of their communities, consumers, and society.

### **Challenge 5. Infrastructure and organisational capacity building**

More concrete support is needed for community groups to make the most effective use of limited staff numbers and physical resources and to build their infrastructure capacity - skills, management, systems, equipment, training and shared resources.

### **Challenge 6. Funding**

Tax law, Australian giving culture, and government priorities and systems must change to encourage us as individuals, as a government, and as a society to fund community groups adequately.

### **Challenge 7. Technology**

Community groups need to be supported to adopt new technologies in administration, advocacy, networking, learning strategy transfer and social support.

### **Challenge 8. Cooperation & collaboration**

Greater sharing of policies, procedures and strategies between community groups should be facilitated. Larger organisations should respect, value and support small groups in delivering programs within a locally designed and locally relevant framework.

### **Challenge 9. Business-community partnerships**

Partnerships between businesses and community groups should be facilitated to provide improved access to finances, knowledge and skills and a commitment to work together towards a commitment to social responsibility and a healthy and viable society.

### **Challenge 10. Leadership and advocacy**

Leaders should be supported and celebrated to advocate for social change, take risks, defend unpopular positions, and pioneer new approaches. More people from a wider range of backgrounds must be included in courses and mentored for leadership roles.

# 1. Community group knowledge

We are faced both with increasingly onerous demands for evaluation at the level of the organisation and with an absence of research into the true determinants of individual and community wellbeing. Community groups must be able to demonstrate that what they do is valuable and deserves support.

## 1.1. The current situation

### Research

We now have available an enormous and compelling body of research that shows that participation in community organisations prevents illness and extends life. An increasing body of outstanding epidemiological evidence shows that joining a community group enhances one's health status even more than giving up smoking or eating less fat. At a societal level, the higher rates of connectedness and trust built up by community group participation promote social capital, economic efficiency, and political capacity.

We know too that these benefits come primarily from those community groups that provide the opportunity for people to share social links by joining up and joining in to serve a local community or a wider cause or activity. Community groups enable people to get a sense of mastery over their lives and to exercise authentic control.

As Professor Syme has said, the more that community groups are open, inclusive and participative, providing opportunities for everyone to 'have a go', the more that participants will be 'in control' and the more significant the preventative impact will be.

### Evaluation

Community groups are facing increasing demands to demonstrate their outcomes and efficiency. In the name of accountability we are seeing the ramping up of endless demands for elaborate reporting requirements that are overwhelming many groups. These demands exacerbate the problems of short-term project funding, purchaser-provider contracting, complex funding processes, and competitive tendering.

At the same time, there are many constraints on developing meaningful outcomes criteria for community groups that the community groups themselves also find meaningful and useful. Too often community groups spend their precious time, resources and energy on completing evaluations rather than on finding creative new approaches to their work, and see little evidence that their evaluative efforts are being used to improve policy, guide programs, or assist other groups.

### Assessment

The value of community groups to the community is being established by the new discipline of social epidemiology. Social epidemiology is distinguished by its insistence on explicitly investigating the social determinants of population distributions of health, disease, and well-being, rather than treating such determinants as a mere background to biomedical phenomena.

These research efforts, however, have until now been dominated by the health sector, restricting efforts in prevention to a narrow focus on individual effort and outcomes usually measured by behavioral risk factors. Health domination also means that the development of disadvantaged communities into learning, safe, sustainable, socially-supportive, economically dynamic communities is undervalued and under-resourced.

## 1.2. The Problem

### Research

The available research, while compelling, does not go down to the level of individual organisations and is mainly American in origin. Large cohort studies researching the impact of Australian community groups on prevention are a seriously under-researched area. Little research is directed towards finding solutions and mechanisms to support the community sector.

Community groups have often been silent and passive subjects of research and the recipients of services and policy responses; a distance frequently exists between group members and the lives and experiences of those who set out to help them build capacity, and this is particularly true in the field of research. Efforts by researchers and policy makers to understand how and what makes community groups tick, or succeed, or fail proceed at a distance from the complex realities which the group members themselves experience and in which they try and make their way.

Much research on community remains in this way a matter of research 'about' or 'on' or 'targeting' groups, rather than 'with' or 'for' them with the groups themselves having a say about what, how and why research is undertaken. Research is currently, in a large part, about assembling evidence of disadvantage and describing it, and less often about moving to 'what to do instead'. If recommendations are developed, they are again often written without the active involvement of the end beneficiaries.

Without the benefit of the direct involvement of those described in research-based advice, many groups can continue with a range of programs and activities that may still fall short or miss the mark for their intended users.

At the same time, top-down services, planning, and advocacy can often move too quickly to action, without sufficient time being spent listening to the voices of those at the user end about what they really need and what would really connect with where they are at.

### Assessment and Evaluation

The escalation in demand for legislative, statistical, and other reporting requirements exacerbates the need for additional staff resources (and using volunteers for these tasks is often an unrealistic solution, as they too need support, supervision, and recognition for any useful outcomes to be achieved).

There is some mystery about what actually comes from the evaluations and assessments that are produced through these demands, as they seem to contribute little either to our knowledge of the determinants of societal wellbeing or to the strategic knowledge base of the sector. Presently much of this evaluation

information is collected and filed without being applied for any higher purpose such as increasing knowledge, improving processes to serve the community, or amending and re-directing policy.

### 1.3. What is needed

#### Research

We urgently need an interdisciplinary research capacity with strong links to the emergent discipline of social epidemiology leading to an understanding of the social dynamics in this area and an approach to the measurement of outcomes. High-quality large-cohort social epidemiological data needs to be available at a local level.

This research is needed to develop new understandings about how to actively involve all relevant stakeholders (including the disadvantaged and voiceless as well as the powerful and influential) in order to generate effective new and systemic practices that have lasting social value.

Action research has been known for nearly a century, but is only now emerging as a major participatory research and development methodology that can be used by people to these ends. It is a way of thinking and collaborating within groups that can plumb more deeply the existing issues confronting them and creatively identify desirable self-strengthening next steps.

By learning to move freely from 'what is' to 'what could be', people can move from dealing with the negative signs of social problems to thinking more of positive 'fabric-strengthening' and of individual or community capacity-building.

The approach is particularly suited to the current turbulent environment - social diversity, growing and concentrated disadvantage, inequity, difference, conflict, and discrimination. This approach has the potential to contribute powerfully to a more democratic response to contemporary social change leading to a fair, just, creative and caring society.

There is an urgent need for community groups themselves to take an active role in research and evaluation processes with those working to assist them. By participating in asking their own crucial questions, contributing their own answers or seeking new ones, reaching their own conclusions and then working out for themselves what is needed next, groups can meet people's real needs more accurately and enhance their confidence and strength at the same time.

There is currently a dearth of people able to facilitate these kinds of active research processes, and a severe shortage of people from the community groups themselves. The few groups who do work like this are seeking support and resources to do the work better.

Community groups must be actively involved in the design of evaluation approaches, methods and processes and must be able to vet the criteria for assessment of outcomes while still being accountable to their stakeholders and the public.

## Assessment and Evaluation

We need to allow community groups to make their case for support in their own terms, developing a comprehensive understanding of an organisation's or a community's "performance" beyond a narrow focus on financial efficiency.

Outcome measurements should be about sharing strategies. We need to shift the focus of evaluation to sharing data on performance and outcomes across networks of community groups -- outcomes such as creating innovative, ecologically sustainable, safe, healthy, and learning communities. Evaluation of community-based projects can be aggregated into community-wide jointly-devised outcome measurements.

Most important, we need to nudge the agenda beyond an exhausting cycle of demands to 'prove' success (never seeing the value of learning from an acknowledged and well-analysed failure, or of analysing the reasons for unexpectedly positive outcomes). It must be recognised that the success of a program may not be evident in the short - or even medium - term.

## 2. Community Group Reform

Change is needed in all areas of the sector, internally as well as externally. Community groups themselves, the systems that support them, and the agencies that deal with them, must continually review their structures and practices to meet new challenges.

### 2.1. The current situation

Many community groups have problems with governance, most have difficulties in funding, and many have difficulties in engaging with government and even with other community groups.

#### Participation

Community groups can be inward-looking and unwelcoming to people and groups who come from a different background, race, gender or age group and lack confidence and experience in social contacts. Groups can sometimes unwittingly tend to seek for members primarily in areas where existing members feel most at home. Unchanging membership profiles can lead to unchanging and immobile Boards (who may complain that nobody else is willing to do the work when in fact the effort has not been made to reach out to new blood, younger participants or participants from different backgrounds or genders to be active and contributing members of the group).

#### Governance

Financial, legal and managerial responsibilities on not-for-profit Boards are increasing. Small community groups are finding it increasingly difficult to attract or retain members to revitalise their Boards and add new skills. While business can provide enormous value to Boards, including much needed skills in IT, marketing, and financial management, it is vitally important to ensure that the community maintains control of Boards. It is also important that the contribution of the business sector to increased efficiency does not compromise the organisation's basic or core mission.

#### Infrastructure

Australian community groups have insufficient organisational, financial and physical capacity to fulfil their mission. Insufficient attention has been given to providing community groups with the infrastructure that they see as vital to deal adequately with their responsibilities.

The low value placed on paid work in community groups (compared with work of equivalent value elsewhere) means that turnover in some community networks is high and recruitment is difficult. Alternatively, poor working conditions can mean that some workers who find it difficult to obtain work elsewhere stay for decades, which may mean that those groups turn inwards and Boards who come and go can to a degree be dominated by long-serving staff. Memberships and participation rates decline, and the very reason for their existence can come into serious question.

Workers in many community groups face problems of isolation, never-ending responsibilities, and burnout, reflected in the escalation of workers' compensation

claims. There is difficulty in recruiting and retaining experienced staff when better-paid jobs abound for the same qualifications. Similarly, there are insufficient experienced staff to provide appropriate debriefing and supervision for new staff and to prepare adequately for succession.

The large majority of community groups that are staffed by voluntary, unpaid labour find that the load on their volunteers is increasing as regulations multiply and demand grows. People need to be supported to join in and join up. Businesses and government departments should allocate staff time to allow their employees to join groups and really participate in the life of the community.

## **Funding**

Most small and many medium-sized community groups are entrepreneurs of the highest order, living on the smell of an oily rag. Many groups require highly skilled juggling acts just to survive. These community organisations are experiencing a soul-destroying struggle for the basic funds they need to operate. Operational costs have risen due to unexpected factors such as increased public liability insurance premiums and well-deserved increases in award payments for the workforce (still far too low relative to the value of the work).

As an additional stress, public liability insurance is still creating a crisis for many community groups, events and festivals, even though most States have now passed legislation favourable to the insurance industry's bottom line.

## **Technology**

The technological revolution offers enormous opportunities for community groups, as well as enormous additional stress. The falling prices of computer-based equipment and the increasing electronic interconnection of society have brought powerful instruments within the reach of any group that knows how to use them; however, much of that knowledge has not been taken up by community groups. High costs and poor training have meant that many of the socially marginalised grassroots groups who need the technology most are instead falling still further behind.

## **Collaboration between large not-for-profits and small community groups**

While collaborations and partnerships are emerging that cross the public, private, and community sectors, much remains to be done. Although the overt policy of encouraging competition between community organisations has been dropped in many jurisdictions, covertly it is still alive; there is little bureaucratic support for collaborative approaches.

## **Business-Community Partnerships**

Business is also part of the community, and is contending with increasingly vociferous demands for it to support the communities in which it operates. On top of triple-bottom-line expectations that business should contribute to a safe, healthy and diverse workforce and a sustainable environment, businesses are now expected to be active in the communities in which they operate and 'partner' community groups for mutual benefit. The gains to business are seen to come from cause-related marketing benefit, staff development and improved reputation, while community groups are expected to gain increased funding from business along with a transfer of business know-how and skills.

## 2.2. The Problem

Many community groups display significant shortcomings in their organisations and structures, and these need to be reviewed in the light of the present situation and the organisation's mission statement, its aims, and its constitution.

Many community groups are not integrated into the community networks that could give them strength and confidence and as a consequence find their dealings with government agencies uncomfortable and unproductive.

### Participation

Young people, women, and marginal and disadvantaged groups tend to be underrepresented in the membership of community groups. However, in the long-term only community organisations with clearly inclusive values at the core will enjoy legitimacy in the eyes of an increasingly diversified general public.

### Governance

Board members, too, tend to be drawn from a comparatively narrow sector of the population, and many tend to be inadequately qualified in the skills needed to operate an enterprise in rapidly changing times.

In view of the increasingly complex expectations placed on Boards, a fundamental challenge is to find people willing to become members of the Boards of smaller community groups.

The governing structures of many community groups requires review to ensure that they can effectively generate renewal, diversity, transition, dynamism and a sense of the future, thus contributing to ensuring the group's continuing growth, evolution and utility.

### Infrastructure

Funding for infrastructure and for staff development is often difficult to come by in an environment that favours direct payment for project outcomes rather than supporting ongoing or core operations of the organisation.

### Funding

Methods of funding most community groups remain narrow, limited, ad hoc and unsustainable.

Without adequate operating budgets many of the other fundraising methods that could be applied within a community development model will flounder. Responsibility for the provision of core funding for smaller community groups is involved in a pass-the-parcel game between different levels of government, although every agency concerned is generous with verbiage about 'community building', 'stronger communities', and 'social capital'.

Individual giving remains relatively low in Australia. Private philanthropy contributes a relatively small amount of funding by international standards, and those funds are often made available for projects rather than for core operating funds. Again, such gifts are generally made to community groups with Deductible Gift Recipient (tax deductible) status, and as most grassroots community groups do not have DGR status (only 19,485 out of 700,000 Australian not-for-profits have

DGR), they are ineligible for most philanthropic funding. The vast majority of community groups without DGR status are seriously disadvantaged in the bid for individual donations (even though two-thirds of Australians do not claim their tax deductions).

It is a significant problem that many of the community organisations that are particularly involved in “community building”, including those acting as community hubs in regional Australia, do not have the benefits of DGR status.

Current patterns of fundraising and resource allocation are self-perpetuating - the more visible a community organisation and the more extensive its capacity to market itself, the more resources it will attract. At the same time, many medium and small, participative community groups are not attracting funds because they lack a fundraising capacity, including the ability to market their services and communicate their messages. This means that potential donors lack knowledge of the values and needs of smaller community groups.

Australians lag in the creation of a culture that values and expects public generosity to community groups. In particular, tax laws and government practice in general still discourage widespread donations to smaller local grassroots community groups.

## **Technology**

Adequate communications infrastructure involves a capital cost, and the inequities within the community sector mean that many smaller groups are relegated to inadequate technical infrastructure. Many community groups lack the knowledge, skills and funding to make full use of the potential of new technology for increasing participation, improving advocacy, providing social support, and transferring strategies across the sector.

Collaboration between large not-for-profits and small community groups  
Successful collaborations between different-sized community organisations (as between community organisations, bureaucracy, and business) require trust, mutual respect, a non-competitive modus operandi, an openness to share resources, learning and knowledge, and a respect for the legitimacy of community-controlled approaches. Relationships between Australian not-for-profit groups at different levels, where they occur, are not always conducted on this footing of equality.

## **Business-Community Partnerships**

Smaller community groups can be relatively unattractive prospects for business partnerships because their value is not understood and they are not seen to be able to deliver the marketing outcomes that can be delivered by larger community organisations with widely known brands.

Community groups concerned with self-help, adult learning, community arts, or community sports and recreation do not always provide commercial organisations with the philanthropic aura that they gain from supporting more visibly charitable service delivery agencies. While there are opportunities for small and medium businesses to partner smaller community groups, limited time, energy, and funds (and a lack of understanding of the way forward) still impose barriers on both sides.

## 2.3. What is needed

All the institutions responsible for the regulation, support, and employment of community groups must reassess the valuation they place on social connectedness, preventative health, and community capacity, and must reframe their objectives, their priorities, and their strategies on this basis.

The solution lies in the complete reassessment by all of the institutions responsible for community groups - This will mean that community controlled participative community groups will be revalued and this will reflect in realistic core support for infrastructure and a revaluing of work reflected in pay structures.

### Participation

If community groups are to renew themselves and remain relevant for future generations they must address succession issues and enable younger generations and diverse community members to have a go as members, as leaders, and as Board members.

To reflect a diverse community it is necessary to bring a diversity of people on to the Boards of community organisations -- people with disabilities, indigenous people, women, young people, and culturally and linguistically diverse people. Boards should also feature representatives of the organisation's clients; for example, people with disabilities should be in the majority on Boards providing services for this area, and people from social disadvantage self-help groups should sit on the Boards of community service providers in large enough numbers to count.

If community groups are to renew themselves and remain relevant for future generations they must address succession issues and enable younger generations, untried participants, and diverse community members to have a go as members, as leaders, and as Board members.

### Governance

New cadres are emerging of courageous community leaders willing and able to stick their necks out effectively and stand up for values and vision for future generations. Those already in leadership positions must have the generosity to mentor, nurture, and protect these people. Community leadership will be strengthened if we respect voices singing a new and different song.

Improved governance and better learning and leadership in community groups will expand their preventative impact. More concrete support is needed to facilitate reform and infrastructure improvement in community organisations.

Board members must be adequately equipped for their roles through the provision of resources, support, and the ready and timely exchange of strategic knowledge across the sector.

Community groups need to strengthen every aspect of their governance, maximising the efficiency of their resource use and improving their accountability to their members, their beneficiaries, and the communities they serve.

While it is essential to strengthen community organisations by introducing business disciplines, it is nonetheless vital to ensure that groups never lose sight

of their core mission and are able to maintain their legitimacy and relevance within the community.

Ultimately there is a need for every Board to have the strategic capacity to achieve a balance between accountability, legitimacy, dynamism, and a vision for the future.

## **Infrastructure**

More concrete support is needed for community groups to make the most effective use of limited staff numbers and physical resources by building their infrastructure capacity - skills, management, systems, equipment, location, and back-office functions such as payroll, human resource management, purchasing, accounting and compliance.

Opportunities should be provided at the local level for grassroots community groups to share office space, meeting places, equipment, and even back-office services.

Governments and funding agencies need to accept the responsibility for contributing to sustainable infrastructure for the community groups whose projects they fund.

## **Funding**

A revolution in giving is needed in Australia. Australians must be inspired, motivated and supported to donate more money to community organisations. Within the not-for-profit sector, systems and regulations need to be modified to make it easier to direct donations to smaller-scale grassroots community groups.

The proven effectiveness of participative community-controlled groups should be reflected in realistic support for core infrastructure and for a revaluation of pay structures.

A significant barrier to most groups is Australia's archaic taxation law. While tax laws in this area have been revised recently, they remain, in many areas, antiquated and unsuitable to the needs of a modern community. They are also at odds with the "community-building" and "capacity-building" policies and programs now supported by Government.

Deductible Gift Recipient (DGR) status is still based on Elizabethan notions of charity and remains out of reach of the vast majority of community organisations. Most participative community groups do not fit the guidelines that would make them eligible for tax-deductible donations. While two-thirds of donors in Australia do not claim their tax deductions, the lack of DGR status is still perceived as a deterrent by many potential donors, who see it as an indication that the group in question might not be worthy, deserving or well-managed. We need urgent reform of this antiquated system to reflect the importance of preventative health and the key role community groups play in the promotion of health, wellbeing, and community harmony.

It is also time for the insurance industry to stop their incessant posturing and politicking and come to the party by providing good value, low-cost insurance options that will allow every Australian community group to continue to serve the community.

## Technology

Community groups need to build capacity and be supported to improve their effectiveness through such new strategies as increasing participation through database management, relationship building through newsletters and email, garnering online support for advocacy, providing social support online (particularly in remote areas and with disadvantaged groups), transferring strategies across the sector through internet and email, online learning, training, and capacity building, online banking, purchasing, and reporting, national and international networks and linkages, and online conferencing, consultation, and feedback.

All national telecommunications companies should be obliged to ensure that a broadband product is on offer at a price all community groups can afford.

Younger generations join the new virtual community networks with an ease that comes from their total immersion in the digital age. Their vision for future participation in the community must be respected, included, and supported. Virtual groups can add to health and wellbeing too.

## Collaboration between large not-for-profits and small community groups

Within the community sector itself there is an escalating need for collaboration between larger and smaller community organisations. For example, developing organisational procedures, policies, and strategies is a burdensome task, but community groups are nonetheless all developing separate policies in such areas as EEO and OH&S in isolation. Policies and procedures should not be reinvented for every community group, and sharing and transferring strategies should be facilitated.

While Australia's major not-for-profit organisations are both highly effective and immensely influential, their very efficiency can sometimes lead them to some impatience with the sometimes less professional presentation of local voluntary associations. Larger community organisations should respect the value of local community-run groups and acknowledge their pre-eminent position vis-à-vis prevention. Instead of large community organisations gobbling up small groups and/or establishing their own centrally controlled programs for local delivery, they should support existing small community groups to deliver programs within locally designed and locally relevant frameworks.

## Business-Community Partnerships

While they find the notion of community capacity building attractive, Governments at all levels have struggled to find their proper role in facilitating such community building.

The idea of strong communities in control of their own destinies does not imply that there is no role for government. On the contrary government has a vital role in enhancing participation through developing effective and equitable policies in taxation, housing, education, health, employment, regional policy and income security. At the same time governments are required to resource local communities in such a way that they are free to determine their own priorities and come up with local solutions to their most pressing issues.

Local government, too, must play an important role in supporting local community

groups to bridge the transitions and changes needed for them to flourish in the twenty-first century.

Existing programs to support the development of partnerships between community groups and commercial enterprises should be properly resourced and eventually extended.

## 3. Community group leadership

### 3.1. The current situation

Leadership from the community sector is needed because government bureaucracies have become risk-averse and zealously controlling, a change reflected in the tightening of funding formulae around bureaucratically-designed programs - many programs destined to fail because they have not been developed with the participation of the people for whom they are intended.

The leadership necessary to get change happening and new movements off the ground has often been rejected as troublemaking, unrealistic or utopian, but Australian social movements have been based on the ideas, action and leadership of community groups. Community groups have in the past had a major input into the development of social movements that have improved people's lives throughout the country - - movements for social justice, or a sustainable environment, human rights, women's equality, children's rights, disability rights, a diverse multicultural Australia, indigenous rights, self-help, and consumer rights. It is vital that community groups are valued for having the courage and tenacity to stand out, be unpopular and to persevere in the face of criticism. It is worth remembering that many of Australia's modern-day heroes and leaders of note were once derided as ratbags, extremists or radicals. Community groups need to be able to influence the direction of society, but have not yet developed the influence with policymakers that will enable them to bring the weight of the sector to bear on the issues that have been identified.

### 3.2. The Problem

Leadership for a just and humane society and for realistic and relevant policy will only be developed when the experience of the community -its hard-won knowledge about what will work and what won't -- is reflected in priorities and programs. Getting a hearing about that experience often requires advocacy.

An enormous shift in mind-set and values is needed so that governments, businesses and the public recognise that community group work is, in many areas, best practice. Community groups should be given greater control and allowed more latitude to decide on the priorities, the approaches and the processes that best suit their community and their culture.

It is essential that the business sector and the bureaucracy at all levels of government learns the skills and values of collaboration with community groups. Because many innovative and visionary groups are unable or unwilling to advocate in what is seen as a hostile environment, all but the most mainstream community voices are often excluded from the development of public policy; where unwelcome opposition is expressed, governments too often censor or restrict the debate to those viewpoints that support their policy.

The views, knowledge and experience of both issue-based and grassroots community groups are absolutely essential for the development of policy and programs that will work. This requires increased respect for advocacy, and involves not simply tolerating but actually welcoming diverging views.

### 3.3. What is needed

Community groups and governments must work together to develop a model for productive cooperation.

All levels of government need to work together to provide support for core operating requirements. Clear guidelines and streamlined processes for grants need to be developed, with feedback from the community being integral to effective design and comprehension.

At another level, local government should accept a role in the support of local community groups through grant programs, the provision of space, support for volunteers, training in management skills, and assistance to community groups in bridging the digital divide. It is vital that every Australian local government authority comes to understand and act on its pivotal role in supporting local community groups, and that local governments act as the midwives in the birth of creative, mutually supportive partnerships between business and community at the local level.

A commitment to inclusion and innovation requires a willingness to value the plethora of younger generation groups that are developing around new issues and new recreational activities -- groups with different and new support needs and new advocacy concerns.

While the skills to implement leadership are important, it is important that our concept of leadership is not reduced to a plethora of often prohibitively expensive courses that teach those skills but never the courage to stand up for unpopular principles and values.

As Sir Gustav Nossal said at the Communities in Control conference,

*“Community leaders can feel as though they are the voice in the wilderness... Community leadership is about getting back up after being knocked down”.*

## What Next?

This Manifesto is intended not to proclaim solutions but to identify and clarify issues arising out of the 2003 Communities in Control conference.

It will remain in draft for the indefinite future and will be discussed at the 2004 Communities in Control conference to be held in Melbourne on 7-8 June, 2004. Its purpose is to stimulate, to provoke, and to begin to mobilise community groups across Australia towards a common agenda.

In line with our views on the processes appropriate to Australia's wildly various, uniquely valuable, and inspirationally creative community sector we seek not to impose mechanisms but to fertilise discussions and inspire new initiatives and new challenges. Every group and network of groups should add, take out, rewrite, create and most importantly circulate it as widely as possible. Please use the ideas in this document as if you were connecting the dots between the society we have and the vision of the society you wish to see.

Out of the Draft Manifesto we hope action will come.

*Work as if you were living in the early days of a better nation.*

We would greatly appreciate your thoughts on these issues and your comments on the manifesto. Send them to [service@ourcommunity.com.au](mailto:service@ourcommunity.com.au) or send to CIC Manifesto, Our Community, 51 Stanley St, West Melbourne, 3003.

## Acknowledgements

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The conference tapped in to a real need for communities to have some control over the development of policy and solutions to local issues - and the need to have their voices heard and respected.

We also thank those who have contributed to the drafting of this manifesto, and would like to particularly thank Nicholas Abbey, Chris Borthwick and Brian Walsh for all their work.

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