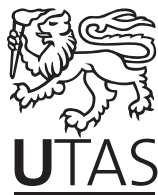


HOUSING
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RESEARCH UNIT

**Community
Capacity Building -
A Practical Guide**

Paper No. 6

**Housing and Community
Research Unit**



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Community Capacity Building – A Practical Guide

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Introduction

Building the capacity of communities to deal with their own problems and development has become an important aspect of the work of a range of government and housing departments. The importance of broadening the scope of housing agencies to help tenants and sustain the communities they live in has become widely recognised among social housing providers in Australia and globally. Sometimes this may mean offering advice services, giving small resources to communities to kick-start community-led initiatives or facilitating the bringing-together of expertise and experience in the community to deal with particular problems. All of this can go to promote the skills and capacities of communities and their members to better deal with the kinds of problems they may face.

This brief guide is intended to give a plain language guide to the development of community capacity by housing workers. We start by looking at what the **concept** of CCB means as well as related keywords. Second, we give practical advice on **methods** for helping to build the capacity of communities specifically with the practitioner in mind. We then look at some brief **examples** of Australian and other international practice in developing community capacity. Finally, we offer advice on some basic practical steps for measuring the **effectiveness** of these methods.

At the end of the guide you will find a list of references if you want to read further and several key internet resources which provide a wealth of accessible information.

i. Cutting through the jargon: What do we mean by community capacity building?

Before we can even begin to talk about developing the capacity of communities we need to ask what we mean by the word **community**. Part of the problem here is that the word has multiple meanings and can refer to small geographical communities (such as neighbourhoods or estates), social networks (online communities) or interest groups that serve a particular purpose (eg. Gay and lesbian activist communities). In general we can distinguish between physical places, like estates, and the social networks of groups living in those places i.e. communities. The issue of social networks (the bonds we have with other people and which may be friends, family or work colleagues) throws up another issue, that of **social capital**. Social capital means the kind of resources contained within our networks with those we

know around us. An example may help to clarify this. Who are your friends and family and what resources could you draw upon if you experienced some form of personal hardship? The possibility of borrowing money, getting advice from friends, learning of opportunities for work are all elements of social capital and can affect our ability to cope with problems and succeed in our personal lives.

There has been a great deal of interest in social capital in recent years by policy makers and others interested in the links between it and various other important outcomes. Research has suggested that people in communities with higher levels of social capital may be healthier, more politically engaged as well as experiencing greater personal safety and education. As with much social research it is not fully clear whether having more social capital makes us healthier, for example, or whether healthier people are more likely to have more social capital! Nevertheless, addressing and boosting the ability of socially excluded groups to cope with their own problems and more effectively mobilise community resources has been seen as an important means of dealing with these problems.

The idea of **social exclusion** is used to refer not simply to poverty but the connectedness of social problems, and this may include poverty. The idea has also been used to broaden our understanding of how social problems are not simply the result of individual choices or abilities but may also be linked to the way in which other groups and institutions may actively *exclude* individuals and particular communities from mainstream social and economic life. The result may be a series of interrelated social problems including unemployment, low levels of education, low incomes, welfare dependency, poor health, physical isolation, criminal activity and inadequate provision of services. Often these problems have a geography to them, such as housing estates where the housing system filters less well-off residents into dwellings which may be isolated or poor quality and lead to secondary problems.

All of this brings us on to the issue of community capacity and development – the desire to boost the capacity of excluded and disadvantaged communities to help tackle these problems. When we talk about **community capacity building (CCB)** we are basically referring to ‘local solutions to local problems’ which enable communities to deal with problems, ultimately without relying on external resources. To take a simple but flexible definition of CCB we can see it as a series of grassroots process by which communities:

- organise and plan together
- develop healthy lifestyle options
- empower themselves
- reduce poverty and suffering
- create employment and economic opportunities
- achieve social, economic, cultural and environmental goals together

To some this may sound a lot like the kind of **community development** (CD) work that was pursued in Australia during the 1970's, often through the not-for-profit sector. The main difference between CCB and CD is that strategies for CCB are more often devised by organisations outside those communities, even if the ethos is still ultimately to try and build skills and coping abilities within communities. CCB also differs from the community development model in the sense that *all* communities are perceived as having inherent strengths, skills and abilities (or 'assets') within them. CD is also more of a circular process, typically informal and open-ended in practice. Certainly one criticism of community development was that it started from the presumption that there was something missing or deficient in more disadvantaged communities, whereas the idea of CCB is to bring together and enhance the existing skills and abilities of communities which are already on the ground. This means we can see CCB as:

'the networks, organisation, attitudes, leadership and skills that allow communities to develop according to their own priorities and needs.'

Communities are therefore enabled to see what skills they have and to identify the kind of problems they want to resolve through common action, supported by workers in housing organisations, which may have the capacity to bring these skills together and enable them further.

So what kind of issues might CCB help to deal with?

Community capacity building can be seen as a way of encouraging the development of more 'healthy' or 'active' communities. The pooling of skills and resources as well as the identification of key local problems that many want to see addressed through common action can provide a springboard for effective action in a number of areas. Researchers working on CCB projects have seen their use to address basic issues like improving local parks, gardens or play facilities or providing co-operatively run coffee mornings and befriending services to counter the isolation of the elderly or single parents. Importantly it is not simply the development of these facilities that is important but also the linked outcomes of pride, key skills and the capacity of communities to become more supportive and social spaces in their own right.

CCB has also been effectively used to identify and address community health problems (such as high local rates of smoking) or to promote greater community safety (such as car accident rates). CCB has also been linked to effectively programs that have reduced local crime rates (such as housebreaking). More specifically CCB can be employed to build capacities like:

- Levels of trust, connectedness, resilience and enterprise, including the ability to join together in common crisis
- Civic engagement, local and political participation
- The strength of local networks

- Pride of place and self-worth
- Presence and role of community leaders
- Use of community facilities, public amenities and open spaces e.g. parks
- Respecting difference, political advocacy and conflict resolution
- Willingness of those better off to assist those who are worse off or in crisis

What principles lie behind CCB?

The ethos behind CCB is one where the kind of priorities and activities come from the community themselves. We have already suggested that who precisely that community is may be difficult to define and this calls for the widest possible engagement at the outset to ensure that the process of target setting and assessing local skills is as inclusive a process as possible. Many writers on CCB also argue that the process needs to be seen as long-term and organisations working with or setting up programs within communities need to be there for the long haul and work in a context that may not be easy. Conflicts over agenda setting are common and resources required to ensure that initial hopes raised are not dashed by the withdrawal of what are often relatively small financial commitments by supporting agencies. Funding withdrawal may also compromise longer-term trust by communities in housing and other agencies so it is important to engage on sustainable courses of action. It also needs to be recognised that CCB can be risky in that sometimes projects fail and there are no guarantees of long-term success.

Given the complexity of community life and differing social and housing environments there is no single solution that will suit all, this also highlights how important it is to ensure that communities identify their own agendas for capacity building rather than receiving instructions or aims that are parachuted in and which then may have little legitimacy or community 'voice' to back them. However, we can give some examples of the kind of outcomes that might be identified:

- stronger community relationships
- increased number of community-based opportunities – such as work or skills and training
- enhanced ability of members to share their ideas and actions for change
- increased competency in setting and achieving goals
- enhanced respect for limited resources (though this could also be a sign of inadequate resourcing and funding)

Criticism of CCB

We need to remember that the idea of CCB is not uncomplicated or without its critics. Some people argue that CCB can be seen as a 'band-aid' solution for focusing attention on local community problems rather than much wider

structural social issues such as poverty and unemployment. Others argue that relying on volunteers and voluntary labour has helped make it easier to withdraw funding for health and social services; staffing community welfare services with volunteers. Even the use of partnerships between housing and other organisations and communities have been perceived as flawed since they continue to the imbalance of power between local government workers and community members since they are not an equal partnership. These criticisms all have some validity – where CCB is useful however, is in allowing communities, often with low political influence, to set their own agenda, facilitated by the work of housing agencies.

These criticisms should also not prevent us from seeing that, while CCB can't set right wider structural problems it has been successful in raising self-esteem, solving problems with locally derived solutions, developing and sharing skills to enhance employability and delivering new resources that address local needs.

ii. Practical approaches to building community capacity

How can community capacity begin to be built using the help of workers in organisations like Housing Tasmania? Here we outline the key stages implicated in pursuing CCB. These are a) understanding who the community are and what needs they have; b) implementing community-identified programs and actions that will address these concerns and; c) measuring the outcomes of these efforts to see whether these actions are effective in practice (dealt with in the next section).

1. Community - Mapping existing community assets, skills and capacities

A key first stage in community capacity building is identifying and communicating with the full community. As part of this process it is important to identify existing community assets and capacities as well as the wider issue of what kinds of problems need to be addressed. The next stage is then using HT resources in combination with existing talents and skills identified through an initial audit to bring the two together. Facilitating a process which identifies the following assets is essential:

1. Talents and skills of residents
2. Existing associations and networks e.g. mother's clubs, scouts
3. Institutions
4. Physical assets including land, buildings and equipment
5. Local stories and knowledge

How this process is undertaken varies in practice but research has shown that there is a critical need to engage as widely as possible to identify the full community and to engage those willing and interested in acting in ways which can aid the wider community. This might include leafletting all households, holding meetings at different times of the day in community

halls to include as many people as possible or through tenant newsletters. Simple surveys and answers to questions about what skills people have and the issues they want to see tackled may be one useful method. In practice this stage is often time-consuming and can be difficult.

2. Action - Identifying goals for action and development

In identifying the areas where capacity needs to be developed and specific issues for resolution it is important to achieve door-to-door contact within neighbourhoods to building partnerships. Publicising commitment to the whole community can be an effective means of combating cynicism and mistrust while a respectful dialogue that engages with the lived experiences of residents as the basis for developing alternative solutions is also essential.

Participation in CCB activities may often be challenged by a range of issues which de-motivate potential activists. This might include the stigma of living in particular housing areas or fear of unfair treatment or simply local crime against individuals and not feeling safe. Other barriers may include the limited coordination of projects or previously raised expectations that have not been met in the past by other agencies, often the case in some urban renewal projects. It is important that previous experiences of decisions being made by authorities without consultation are challenged by an active engagement and supporting action by an agency like Housing Tasmania. Anxiety over possible conflicts experienced in community meetings or the dominance of representatives from previous community groups such as older white men or other 'community elites' may also require active management to achieve a broader representation actively supported by the agency.

Key points on ensuring good practice in CCB

- Involving local people from the outset before any action is taken; start with issues that concern them
- Locally based resources are essential, such as neighbourhood houses, so that support can be easily accessed
- Changing the existing bureaucratic culture may be important to involving 'clients' in decision-making processes
- Adequate time and resources need to be given over to participation and action
- Local people should be employed where possible in key roles so that management is maintained where possible within the community
- Providing for a diverse range of small projects rather than a limited number of larger projects helps to prevent a relatively narrow pool of community members from being involved thus broadening the appeal of the wider program and interest within the community
- It is important to recognise that conflict is a very normal part of CCB process and community workers who are facilitating CCB projects need to have the skills to negotiate and resolve small group conflicts

- Over-involvement (and potential exploitation) of volunteer community members needs to be guarded against as does the danger of selecting particular community groups and individuals (the usual suspects) while excluding others
- 'Taking it too far' - pushing community groups and individuals into CCB projects may be inappropriate
- Community members need to have faith in the priorities and policies of housing organisations, this may be particularly challenging with Housing staff who may be regarded with hostility and mistrust by community members and tenants.

How not to do it

Many writers on CCB have found that particular methods used during the process of adopting a CCB approach are more likely to lead to failure. In particular this evidence suggests that projects lacking long-term vision or those focused on short term objectives are unlikely to be effective. Implementing new community projects can also detract the energy and commitment of local volunteers from previously-established social networks and groups. As we have already said it is essential that resources are adequate and seen as a long-term commitment to ensure that the longer-term nature of CCB is acknowledged and so that communities can see that a significant obligation has been made. This is particularly important for non-community housing organisations which operate to different time-frames, funding cycles and expectations than might a small community. It is also essential that the process is as inclusive as possible for members across the community - only involving small or willing groups will prevent the necessary legitimacy required to achieve deeper and more effective results in local action.

These lessons suggest that it is important that community workers are seen as accountable to local community members as well as their own management and that local community members can identify with these workers. Making sure that your manager allows for your active engagement with local communities on a daily basis and communication is essential.

CCB projects that fail may also damage the social networks and community relationships that previously existed so making it all the more important that the process as a whole is taken seriously. Jackson (see reference below) suggests that it is useful to distinguish between inside and outside facilitators and barriers. Inside facilitators are enabling conditions created by communities for achieving outcomes such as meeting spaces or child care. Inside barriers are those conditions that block the pathway towards achieving goals such as conflict. Outside barriers are conditions external to communities such as a lack of public transport while outside facilitators are external conditions like grant funding that help community workers and residents achieve their goals.

Action point - Draw up a list of the possible facilitators and barriers that you might envisage in your own CCB work. Encourage community members to think about these issues in early consultations.

iii. Examples of effective projects in action

Here we give some brief examples of CCB projects linked to housing programs in Australia and which give more of an idea of how CCB work has successfully operated on the ground in other areas.

iii.a. Community Project Grant Fund (South Australian Housing Trust)

This is a small funds scheme for made available for community development projects targeted towards housing customers as primary beneficiaries – non-profit projects aimed at enhancing neighbourhood networks, developing people’s knowledge and skills for community responses to community issues and developing ongoing groups. Examples from recent funding rounds have included:

- Breakfast programs for Indigenous school age children
- Gathering Tree Gardening project
- Producing resident newsletters
- Parenting workshops and ‘grandparents as carers’ workshops
- Series of community artworks with local Indigenous communities
- Setting up a local Goodwill store
- Facilitating a Community Show Day for disadvantaged children
- Delivering computer training to community members

iii.b. Community Linkages Program (ACT community funding program for public housing tenants)

Individual grants are made available up to \$5000 for community projects developed and implemented by housing tenants and which adopts a CCB approach. The program aims to achieve safer living conditions, enable more long term tenancies, enable social interaction within housing communities, enhance social interaction between community and public housing tenants and the broader community, link tenants to employment opportunities and to community and support services; and reduce poverty.

iii.c. Community Gardens and Neighbourhood Renewal in Waterloo (Work by the University of New South Wales & NSW Department of Housing)

Full report available at <http://www.housing.nsw.gov.au/>

The Community Gardens project on the Waterloo Housing Estate started in 1996 as a community development strategy through the NSW Department of Housing. These projects have had various roles including the reclamation of public space, community building, facilitation of social and cultural expression and educational resource providing useful information about

sustainable gardens. The results of the research reveal that the gardens contributed to the community more widely through promoting a positive sense of community, a place for friendship and generosity, the development of trust and caring relationships between tenants. The work also helped to diminish cultural boundaries and racial stereotypes while improving health and physical wellbeing and reducing costs through garden produce and providing fresh food and medicinal herbs.

However, as the research also showed that the community gardens also faced the challenges of internal and external sources of conflict, disputes over boundaries and neglected lots, cultural conflict and misunderstanding. Conflict with children and young people perceived as disrespectful of gardeners was experienced so that dispute resolution mechanisms and management support were required.

iii.d. Northcott NSW, Big hART

This project at the Northcott housing estate in New South Wales (a community previously described as ‘completely dysfunctional’ and referred to as ‘Suicide Towers’) involved development work through arts intervention and community cultural development. In the *600 Stories Project* the stories of residents living in the estate through radio plays, theatre and films were created. Tenants were directly involved in the productions through telling their stories, acting, writing, filming, editing and developing musical scores. A film was made (*Can You Hear Them?*) about life at Northcott and an ABC one-hour documentary was also made to counter the stigmatisation of the area. The project involved funding commitments that allowed the appointment of a full-time Crime Prevention Officer by the Police to address high crime rates and the appointment of a Community Development Worker to the estate to assist in facilitating community projects and initiatives.

Other examples of CCB initiatives for further inspiration

- Better design of public spaces to be more attractive and feel safer – unsafe places identified by community members and local crime audits
- Community and neighbourhood technology centres in urban and rural areas
- No-interest loans schemes
- Parenting education and support
- Community harmony activities that celebrate different cultural groups
- Allowing the use of computing facilities in Housing offices out of hours and supervised by tutors
- Use of public schools as multipurpose community facilities
- Monthly tenant newsletters
- Community advice and information centres using neighbourhood housing office facilities
- Free computers for residents and training to build capacities for self-running of community network and further training
- Secure community information boards
- Community reference groups
- Christmas twilight concert, community arts projects, community safety events and neighbourhood BBQs.

iv. How to evaluate approaches to building community capacity

It can be difficult to measure the impact of community development projects. Where possible it is important to build evaluation into the program from the start, this will mean that community and housing partners will understand the implications of involvement and can start to think early about the question of what success means. Is it that people say they are happier, that they feel more able to overcome the challenge of particular problems or that people feel less isolated from those making decisions about the management of the area they live in? All of these are possibilities but it is again important that the community has ownership over the process of evaluation, that it is not something imposed from outside without consultation, or part of a box ticking exercise employed by the housing organisation as part of its own evaluation exercises. Again, the direction of approaches by personnel from outside the community will undermine the longer-term effectiveness of approaches which are importantly about what communities determine for themselves as the key goals of capacity building.

Indicators of capacity such as levels of trust, reciprocity, communication strategies, changes in skills bases, political and local participation and altruism can be assessed through multiple methods. Using several techniques such as focus groups, questionnaires and interviews will broaden the picture of what has been effective and why. At the heart of a CCB evaluation should lie the question – ‘How can this program, through every stage of its implementation, build the capacity of the community as identified by members of that same community, its groups and members?’. Other areas

where information can be gathered might include looking at documents, meeting minutes, practitioner diaries or looking at newspaper articles relating to the community and neighbourhood. Some writers suggest that using a workshop can be helpful - where planning a meeting in which CCB workers or housing staff and key community reps meet can be used to reach agreement on issues such as the capacity domains (areas in which capacity building is sought), where the community should be in regards to change and direction, identifying resources required for actions. These kinds of questions are also important in relation to other techniques like focus groups or interviews.

Examples of capacity indicators and possible measures

Organising - Organising events and meetings, speaking in public, lobbying politicians

Technical - learning computer skills, cookery, car maintenance

A supportive community - Information in different languages of members of the community, community events include all age groups in wide range of activities

Residents positive perceptions about community - Residents value feeling member of their community, comfortable with outsiders visiting the community

Sense of control and ownership - Residents on boards of directors/committees of local agencies, residents involved in program design and implementation by local agencies.

Determining what indicators and measures can be used to evaluate the ongoing implementation of CCB activities is important and needs to be done early. Ensuring that the community is involved in thinking through these kinds of measures will also give a sense of purpose in the overall objectives of the capacity building program. Since CCB is something that should be primarily directed by communities this raises issues around involving communities in the evaluation of programs designed to promote their skills and capacities to achieve positive social and economic outcomes. An important example in this respect is the involvement of community members as researchers for analysing neighbourhood needs and developing their own strategies. Training residents in generating their own research and recommendations (sometimes called Participatory Action Research) not only helps communities to communicate to themselves the results of CCB activities but also raises the skills base of members of the community trained in, for example, the use of surveys and their analysis or the conducting of interviews and writing of plain language reports.

In the Scottish Community Action Research Fund (SCARF), funded by the national housing agency, Communities Scotland, Participatory Action Research projects have been used in several housing estates. This fund was used to support local groups to carry out their own research, develop their knowledge and skills to improve their communities. All research must be

community-led and must involve members of the community being researched. Examples include 'Mothers against drugs' which used a postal survey on local drug use researched by a group of women from Irvine concerned about drug taking and dealing within the locality and the Mill of Haldane Play Facility Aspirations where a group of young people with youth workers mapped the availability and condition of local play areas near and around the estate through a combined methodology of mapping, site visits and a survey. These examples show the effectiveness and wider impact of involving the local knowledge and skills of communities which can also enable feelings of empowerment and confidence in contexts outside the community.

In thinking about how to evaluate progress we need to remember that communities change, new people move in, while others move out. This can present challenges to the management of the process when it is possible that those living in an area are not fully the same as those who started at the beginning of a CCB program. On one level we know what is effective and suitable for a particular community when they tell us that things have worked. However, this is not as simple as it might sound, what if one section of the community claims a resounding success while others criticise the kind of issues targeted in CCB?

Face to face interaction with project participants is a particularly useful **method** for gaining an in-depth understanding of community relationships and dynamics - these issues are much less likely to be apparent through survey methods or through simply observing community groups or activities. In other words, for whoever is doing the evaluation it is important to spend time in the community and become involved in order to understand how CCB programs are playing-out in practice. A good example of a relevant technique for evaluation is the use of focus groups in naturally occurring groups. In practice this means identifying a series of basic questions asked at a specially convened meeting of a group like a youth club, advice centre or other organisation/group that regularly meets. This makes access relatively easy and a rapport between members of the group will already exist.

While the use of surveys is possible it is often the case that qualitative approaches (i.e. the use of methods involving speaking to residents and listening to their views, rather than surveys and other 'counting' approaches) will be more appropriate to the task of evaluating CCB programs. It is important that information is gathered from a wide range of stakeholders, including tenants, CCB workers (if appropriate), managers of community organisations and other relevant people.

It is important to think laterally about what kind of outputs might be useful as evaluation feedback. Will it be the production of a brief report, a piece in a tenant newsletter, or verbal feedback at a community centre? Ensuring that results are communicated effectively and, critically, appropriately is essential to making sure that ongoing CCB activities are made relevant and meaningful

to communities involved. If community members are involved in the process of evaluation it is much more likely that decisions about what is appropriate will be more appropriate. Finally, acting on feedback and the results of evaluation is an essential form of closure in the process, by which communities are able to see supportive action that helps them to realise their ambitions.

Resources

i. Useful websites -

Bank of I.D.E.A.S. - www.bankofideas.com.au/resources

Online resource aimed at the development of health, inclusive, sustainable and enterprising communities - based on philosophy of bottom-up and grassroots community development. Inherently optimistic and assumes each individual person has capacities, abilities, gifts and ideas to contribute to their local communities. Website includes 20 clues to creating and maintaining a vibrant community, 102 community projects that build social capital and 109 things I can do to build social capital in my community, tips for maintaining community interest and involvement and Powerpoint presentations on Asset-Based community development.

Vic Office of Housing - <http://hnb.dhs.vic.gov.au/ooh/>
Tenant participation and Advocacy

Neighbourhood Renewal (Victoria) - <http://www.neighbourhoodrenewal.vic.gov.au/ooh/web/nrwsite.nsf>

Community Builders (NSW) - www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/

Bank of IDEAS - www.bankofideas.com

South Australian Housing Trust - www.housingtrust.sa.gov.au
Urban renewal - community development

Department of disability, housing and community services (ACT) - <http://www.dhcs.act.gov.au/hcs/Services/services.htm>
Services - Community Linkages Program

Stronger Families and Communities Strategy (SFCS) Projects (Aust Institute of Family Studies) - <http://www.aifs.gov.au/sf/sffprojects.html>

The Community Development Handbook (Canadian Gov.) - online resource http://www.hrsdc.gc.ca/asp/gateway.asp?hr=/en/epb/sid/cia/comm_dev_e/handbook.shtml&hs=cyd

Communities Scotland - <http://www.communitiesscotland.gov.uk>

Taking Control in Your Community - (UK Website)
<http://www.communitiestakingcontrol.org/default.asp>

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