

# (From 'Weaving Tapestries')

## Introduction

### Building Community

It seems that everyone is talking about the need for 'a greater sense of community'. What does that mean? And, more importantly, how do we achieve that. How can each of us, through our lives and work, help build the capacity of 'communities' to support themselves? These and many other questions are being asked and discussed by people throughout Australia. Across fences, in community groups, faith groups, recreation clubs, pubs, in non-government organisations and business meetings, and in the highest echelons of Government we are struggling with the question: "What can we do to build stronger 'community' in Australia.

If you are one of the people asking this question, then this "Handbook" is for you. It has been developed by the Local Government Community Services Association in the hope that it will contribute to shared understandings of how we can all work towards stronger communities in our local areas.

'Communities' are not always within local areas or neighbourhoods. Many find their own community through friendship networks, 'interest groups' (such as sport, culture, spirituality, self help), e-mail networks and a thousand other places. But many people also want community within easy access to their home. They want community where they live. We must never insist on this. But we can all do our part in making it more possible. This little handbook provides some glimpses on how we can achieve that.

### Changed communities

It's important to acknowledge, as we strive to build community in our local areas, just how profoundly the concept has changed. For thousands of years 'community' was a natural and inherent part of every day life. In the past, and in many cultures around the world today (including some within Australia), the idea of a 'Handbook' in community building would be laughable. In these places and times, people lived in community like fish swim in water.

But over the last 150 years a devastating array of changes have meant that the natural processes of community building which we had unthinkingly engaged in over centuries (and which continue to sustain people in other cultures) became - slowly and imperceptibly - unviable.

Some of these changes include:

- ⊖ the separation of work and home,
- ⊖ radical changes in family size and structure,
- ⊖ growth of home based entertainment,
- ⊖ increased car-ownership,
- ⊖ higher workforce participation amongst women,
- ⊖ the devastating effects of unemployment,
- ⊖ longer working hours,
- ⊖ the privatisation and centralisation of shopping precincts,
- ⊖ a media led focus on fear and crime,
- ⊖ a diminished tolerance of young people in public places,
- ⊖ a more transient workforce,
- ⊖ higher rates of moving house and suburb
- ⊖ higher levels of job insecurity

It is not surprising, then, that our natural processes of community building have faded, and we need to find ways, together, to make community work in this changed environment.

## Statement of Philosophy

Underlying the contents of this handbook are a number of 'assumptions':

1. That strong communities are an essential foundation for the Social, Economic and Environmental outcomes that we to achieve.
2. That the strength or "**capacity**" of communities relies on:
  - spirited people, contributing in the way that is most important to them;
  - strong and healthy relationships between community members, and between different and diverse communities
  - a community culture that has both resilience and hope.
3. That building the capacity of communities is helped by the skilled involvement of governments that respond to community initiatives, rather than trying to direct them.
4. That governments are not the primary player in community building - people are.
5. That the work and interaction of almost everyone - governments, agencies, neighbours and friends - can be done in a way that builds capacity (ie, more spirited people, healthier relationships, more resilience and hope) or, on the other hand, in a way that diminishes capacity. Therefore, paying attention to capacity building in all that we do makes a profound difference.
6. That the interests of 'community' can never override human rights.
7. That the way we build community can never be 'dictated' by others. We will build communities in a wide range of different ways, depending on our own personal and collective culture and preferences.

## About the Handbook

This handbook is aimed at anyone interested in building community. There are many of us. Faith groups, neighbours, sports clubs, schools, businesses, local agencies, Councils, government departments and policy makers can all be a part of genuine community building. And we need to be part of it together, rather than working against each other. Local Government is able to be the 'linch-pin' of community building, bringing all these groups and many others together. What we notice, though, is that there are widely differing understandings of what 'community development' or 'community building' looks like and how it should be done.

This is why the Local Government Community Services Association has produced this handbook. We hope that it can provide a 'gathering point' for common dialogue around community development. Everyone will work in their own unique way to develop the potential of community. But in doing so, we also need to speak and work together. We in the Association hope the simple handbook helps all of us do that.

The handbook offers simple frameworks for guiding our work. Of course, there are far more comprehensive books and tools that are available to you if you are interested in community development, and many of these are listed at the end. But few, we think, provide the sort of 'snapshot' that this handbook offers. We hope that it helps you feel more confident, and even passionate about the work- paid and unpaid - of community development; work that is crucial to the well-being of all of us, now and in the future.