

National Local Government Community Development Conference

Just and Vibrant Communities

Introductory Speech – Jenny Merkus President LGCSAA

Welcome to “Just and Vibrant Communities”, the ninth conference of the Local Government Community Services Association of Australia to develop skills and values for just vibrant and sustainable communities.

I would like to begin by paying my respects to the indigenous elders, the traditional owners of the land we stand on.

I would like to welcome Kirsty Sword Gusmao, first lady of Timor Leste, who is our keynote speaker.

At the outset I would like to thank the Local Government Community Services Association of Queensland and the Queensland Local Government Association for working in partnership with the LGCSAA to make this conference happen. I would also like to take this opportunity to thank our sponsors and supporters who have provided both funding and advice in planning for the conference, and they include:

- Townsville City Council for hosting the conference and giving us their warm hospitality;
- The Australia Council for the Arts
- The Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services, Territories and Local Government Division;
- The Commonwealth Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts and the
- Queensland Department of Families

Both the national and State Associations have collaboratively determined major themes of the conference to reflect on changes and trends and the re-emergence of community development, sometimes known as capacity building, as central to achieving well-being outcomes for our local communities.

We want to focus on good integrated community planning that is concerned with all dimensions affecting well-being and quality of life – the social and cultural, environmental and economic- the triple bottom line, but if you include the cultural as an element in its own right then it’s the quadruple bottom line. At this conference we also want to particularly explore the place of culture and arts, as a foundation for building social capital and creating vital communities

When we talk about just and vibrant communities, what outcomes are we seeking to achieve. Jenny Wills, in the Association's publication *Just, Vibrant and Sustainable Communities*, drew on the work of Labonte, Hancock, Edwards and Landry in coming up with this diagram to succinctly describe the outcomes we aspire to :

Slide 1 Outcomes of a Just and vibrant community

There are a number of underpinning core principles and values of community and civic life that have been described as cultural values by Jenny Wills in *Just Vibrant and Sustainable Communities*. These are also referred to by Jon Hawkes in the *Fourth Pillar of Sustainability*.

- Creativity, social richness and aesthetics
- Equity before the law
- Fairness, equality of opportunity and social responsibility
- Gender equality
- Harmony, cohesion and mediation of conflicts
- Inclusiveness, connection and compassion
- Learning, reflection innovation and enterprise
- Nurturing of physical, social emotional and spiritual growth
- Participation, empowerment and collaboration
- Reconciliation between indigenous and non-indigenous Australians
- Sense of place, belonging and connectedness with other people and the natural environment and its inhabitants.
- Tolerance, respect for and celebration of difference and diversity of ideas, values and faiths.
- Universal and equal suffrage

In considering the desired outcomes, I reflected where we have come, since our last conference "Riding the Rapids of Change." I couldn't help but think we had been prophetic in the naming of that conference when considering the seismic changes that have rocked our sense of justice and humanity in the last two years.

What is the global and national backdrop that we have had to deal with in recent times?

Many of us in our local communities have had to meet the challenge of increasingly fearful and divided communities brought about by the

- tragedy of September 11,
- a government that went to war with Iraq,

- Bali,
- the detention of refugees, including children,
- Tampa, and
- the lies about the children overboard incident.

Paul Kelly, the Australian editor at large for the Australian, described the tragedy of September 11 and Bali as Turning Points in our History.

He says, “ that we are in a dangerous and unpredictable environment in which deep historical and cultural currents are flowing powerfully, producing changes that we have not yet come to grips with.”

We must question:

Has America, in nationalising rather than internationalising the issues, failed to take advantage of the collective sympathy that was so apparent following September 11 and lost the opportunity to unite the west and the moderate Muslim world against terrorism? Has America, and by implication Australia and Britain, in taking pre-emptive action against Iraq without UN sanction, divided the western alliance, a significant unifying world body? (Kelly 2003)

The fact that citizens have also been misled about weapons of mass destruction, the ostensible basis on which the “coalition of the willing” went to war, has also severely diminished our trust in government.

The politics of fear and mistrust that is now so prevalent in this country has had a deep impact on our psyche and has fractured relationships in many communities.

In Moreland, in the diverse community where I work, there has been a discernible increase in racism. As a local government we have been increasingly challenged to facilitate and support the existing networks of relationships that enable communities to bridge their differences and resolve conflict, in the absence of any real leadership at the national level.

In scanning the macro social, economic and environmental issues impacting on our communities, the picture looks pretty bleak when measured against the outcomes and values previously mentioned.

I’ll begin with the social and will start by talking about the refugee issue.

In breach of human rights standards and regardless of sustained international and national criticism and advocacy, the federal government continues with its mandatory detention of asylum seekers, including children.

Minister Ruddock's appeal to the High Court following the decision of the Family Court about children in detention shows that the government, in its obduracy about the refugee issue, is willing to defy all accepted moral standards, including those related to the protection of children.

In terms of reconciliation, whilst there is unlikely to be a formal apology from the Commonwealth government for the stolen generation and the dispossession of the aboriginal people, emphasis seems to have shifted to self determination and other critical issues such as:

- education,
- employment pathways,
- justice,
- violence including family violence and
- sexual and substance abuse.
- Governance

The ideas of Treaty remain on the agenda. To a degree this has been strengthened by dissatisfaction with litigation around Native Title legislation which has, in turn, stimulated action in the area of negotiation – specifically Indigenous Land Use Agreements. We see agreement making between 13 local government areas in Western Australia and the indigenous community. We see Reconciliation Australia and ATSIC taking a lead in developing good governance initiatives that will support agreement making.

It is clear that we are continuing to experience a shrinking of government responsibility - a move to a narrower targeted safety net, user pays policies and privatisation leading to a reduction in and a loss of a universal platform of services.

A recent example of this is the proposed changes to Medicare legislation. This proposal moves to a two tiered system: away from a universal system of health care which guarantees access to doctors regardless of income to one which restricts bulk billing to people with a health care card or similar concessions. This would mean only individuals earning less than \$17,000 or families with an income of \$34,000 would be eligible.

The Government's proposed changes will fail to provide adequate access to doctors for those on low incomes, and families who can't afford payments will delay visiting the doctor, impacting on their health. Pressure will be also be put on already stretched emergency departments in hospitals

There have been many questions about how, as a society we will continue to support Australia's increasingly ageing population in terms of home care, acute care and residential care. Recent reviews of aged care services seem to be about keeping the cake the same size, in defiance of any notions of adequacy.

Policy emphasis is on families and communities caring for their own in a time when many women, the traditional carers, are not readily available for caring responsibilities because they work.

When it is evident that reliance on the aged care pension for people over 65 years is high at 76.6 per cent and that in 2000 11.2 per cent of people over 65 years lived in poverty then adequacy and capacity to pay has to be a key consideration (Just Policy – A Journal of Australian Social Policy VCOSS 29 April, quoting Harding, King and Kelly 2002, p19).

There has been much discussion about superannuation funding care and of older people using the capital asset they have in their own homes to pay for their care. Whilst superannuation may in the future deliver this, it is doubtful. There has also been very strong reaction to using the home asset as it threatens home ownership for the next generation:- an ideal cherished by most of the Australian population.

What of the Early Years and Family Policy? Research into the way human beings develop in the early years from 0-5 years has revealed the importance of a nurturing and stimulating environment to provide all children with a fair chance of growing into healthy and socially competent adolescents and adults.

In response to this research there have been several proposals and initiatives. A National Agenda for the Early Years is proposed and a broadbanding review has also been under way, ahead of this agenda. This review seems to be about targeting family day care and other support programs, services many local governments are involved in, to special needs children rather than all children, as is currently the case. Again, a move away from universal access to fairly narrow targeting.

In recognition of women's need to maintain income and to enable families to have children, the Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission launched a proposal for a paid maternity leave scheme, funded by Government. Under the proposed scheme women would be paid 14 weeks income replacement at a rate of up to the federal minimum wage – currently \$431 a week. This was not addressed in the May Federal Budget.

In terms of housing there is uncertainty about the future of the Commonwealth State Housing Agreement that guides policy and expenditure. Funds for housing stock have declined and the Government has instead provided rent subsidies in the private

market. Because of the increases in the cost of properties and other factors such as unemployment, the casualisation of the workforce, older people who are asset rich and income poor, the downturn of the economy, many people are living in substandard housing.

The provision of public housing has severely declined, and existing funds are being used to maintain older stock. As a consequence, waiting lists are extremely long and the provision of public and community housing is so targeted that only people with severe or multiple problems are getting assistance.

Now to the economic. Whilst there has been sustained economic growth, official unemployment figures have remained between 6% to 8% and around 17% of the Australian population is living in poverty – this equates to about 3.4 million people.

The globalisation of our economy has meant loss of jobs, increasing rates of under-employment and hidden unemployment, increasing casualisation, precarious paid work and deregulation of labour conditions. A significant proportion of the population relies on social security payments for income and there are an increasing number of children growing up in jobless households.

Overwhelming evidence from welfare agencies shows that the federal government's mutual obligation requirements, in exchange for income support, have resulted in the society's most disadvantaged members being at risk of substantial income losses and financial hardship, due to unfair punishments for minor failures. Recent reports have revealed the system also fails to deliver support for those with the highest needs and barriers to employment (from the Brotherhood of St Laurence, St Vincent de Paul Society and the Centre for Public Policy at Melbourne University).

With the recent changes to the Job Network, where private providers are taking over Employment National's 140 offices, there is potential for service gaps in rural and remote areas, where services may not be commercially viable.

There has also been work intensification for those in employment. Income inequality has increased and there are wide disparities in income between states and territories and capital cities and rural areas.

Since the Federal budget in May 2003, the higher education sector has the ability to set fees up to 30% above HECS rates for most courses, with the exception of nursing and teaching, and to double the number of full fee paying courses. An interest rate at 3.5% above CPI can be charged for loans capped at \$50,000 for a course. Higher education is again structured for those who can pay with a loss of opportunity for people on lower incomes.

Wendy Weeks states in the recent publication, *Community Practices in Australia* “ In Western countries, amid the thriving economic rationalism and individualism, ideological shifts have occurred. Social analysis has been overtaken by the individualisation of social problems. Housing, jobs and income have increasingly been conceptualised as a matter of individual, not social or collective responsibility.” This has become increasingly apparent in the policies of the federal government. We could call them Government of Queue Jumpers – if you have the funds you’ll be right – hardly a fair go.

What about environmental issues? The Federal Government has not signed the Kyoto Protocol because it does not see it as advantaging Australia’s economic position. Peak industrial and economic groups are now saying that Australia’s failure to sign will isolate us and affect our trading position. Some argue that there is a real possibility of a trading blockade.

Australia has just about the worst environmental footprint. There are significant salinity, water, and soil problems needing urgent and radical political and resource solutions. To date there are some signs that governments are recognising the urgency of addressing these issues but our present national and state governmental responses are inadequate to the scale of the problems. We need national leadership.

The global, national, regional and local interconnect and impact on our communities in the interrelated social, economic and environmental and cultural dimensions.

There has been a re-emergence of community and cultural development in local government and in communities to achieve triple bottom line outcomes.

This seems almost paradoxical in the face of the global and national context, but citizens and their local elected representatives sense the growing urgency of environmental and economic sustainability and the imperative of social inclusion to maintain and nurture a peaceful, diverse Australian society.

Local governments have been at the forefront of effort to create pathways for just and vibrant communities and State and Territory governments have also developed policies aimed at capacity building and cultural expression.

It has not only been local government but also the citizenry. There has been discernible growth of community development activities coming from our communities. This has been particularly so in the environmental area but also in supporting East Timor and in defence of human rights, especially with regards to refugee and indigenous issues.

Local governments have been engaged with building democracy, citizenship and nurturing social capital.

At the governance level policies and strategies that address the triple bottom line are common. Sustainability is becoming core business of local government. We are stepping out of our silos to work holistically to achieve integrated outcomes and organisational cultures are changing to reflect this new approach.

There is increasing recognition that everything humans do has a cultural impact and that in our community planning we need to be cognisant of values, different lifestyles habits, faiths and people's sense of themselves.

Donald Horne in his article - Repertoires of Being Human – says “we are not talking about culture as an add on. We are talking human basics” and that only one aspect of culture is intellectual and artistic activity. This is culture with a capital C, however this is often what we think of when we talk about culture. But art is a way of communicating our different cultures and is an expression of our humanity that crosses all boundaries therefore it also is not an add on.

In many of our local governments we acknowledge that arts and cultural expression have the potential to engage, to educate and to challenge, and therefore to contribute to the development of individual and community identity as well as to a shared culture.

Emphasis has been placed on indicators of sustainability and well being, consistent with the managerial paradigm that if you can't measure it then you can't manage it. The involvement of our communities in vision setting and indicator development is essential as what we choose to measure defines and directs what we do. However, it is important that action around sustainability and wellbeing occurs when there is an absence of measurement, in good faith, because of our values and because we need to be precautionary.

Much more attention is being given to partnerships and the processes of consultation, engagement and empowerment of communities.

A major factor in our community and cultural practice is the growth of reciprocal community networks of trust and the acceptance, understanding and enjoyment of different cultures, contributing to identity, a sense of place and social and cultural richness.

I hope this conference provides you with the opportunity to engage with the questions

Is community planning a foundation for sustainable communities?

Social Capital – What are the benefits for local communities?

How does the contribution of arts, culture and diversity assist in building vibrant communities?

How can communities strengthen just outcomes and human rights?

Is the emphasis on efficiency and corporatisation impacting on local democracy, community development and community services?

I hope that our coming together for the next three days enables us to hear about the challenges and good practice happening in our local governments and that our pathways to enabling just and vibrant communities are assisted by the presentations and workshops.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BROTHERHOOD of St Laurence
Facts, Figures and Suggestions for the Future – Poverty
July 2002
- HAWKES, John
The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability
Culture's essential role in public planning
Cultural Development Network and Comm. Ground
Re-printed 2003
- HORNE, Donald
Repertoires for being human
Paper delivered at Cultural Vitality Symposium
July 2003
- KELLY, Paul
A Turning Point of History
Paper to Institute of Public Administration, Victoria Division
Autumn 2003
- SALVARIS, Mike, Project Leader and Report Author
Irene Wolcott, Senior Research Fellow
Community Participation and Community Planning in Moreland: Research Study
Swinburne University of Technology
April 2002
- VCOSS Number 29
Just Policy – A Journal of Australian Social Policy
April 2003
- WEEKS, Wendy, Lesley Hoatson and Jane Dixon (Edited by)
Community Practice in Australia
Pearson Education Australia 2003
- WILLS, Jenny
Just, Vibrant and Sustainable Communities – A Framework for Progressing and
Measuring Community Well-being
Local Government Community Services Association of Australia
2001

Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the work of Moreland City Council's officers - Celia Robinson, Frances Grindlay, Roger Collins and Richard Jennings who assisted me with research for this paper.