

# Art and Wellbeing

**A guide to the connections between Community Cultural Development and Health, Ecologically Sustainable Development, Public Housing and Place, Rural Revitalisation, Community Strengthening, Active Citizenship, Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity.**

**Deborah Mills and Paul Brown**





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# Art and Wellbeing



## Foreword

Sometimes it's all too easy to focus on the difficult aspects of our everyday lives, and yet we are surrounded by so many wonderful stories, so many courageous and creative people. As each case study in *Art and Wellbeing* shows, creativity is inextricably linked to our wellbeing—people's lives are changed, and communities and cultures are strengthened, whenever imagination is encouraged.

The authors have adopted a broad definition of wellbeing and, in particular, community wellbeing: how we relate to others and to our environment, how inclusive our societies are, how we address and respect cultural diversity.

Investing in creative, collaborative activities can help agencies to implement their policies, and contribute to individual and community wellbeing. Such investment needs to be integrated with and respond to social, environmental and economic development—expressed in the partnerships between government and non-government agencies, between communities and multi-disciplinary teams, between artists, health workers, planners, scientists, policy makers and community workers.

We recognise that wellbeing issues are interdependent and cannot easily be dealt with in isolation. I'm sure *Art and Wellbeing* will encourage arts and cultural agencies to work with other organisations involved with community wellbeing, to strengthen social capital and achieve policy objectives.

Jennifer Bott  
CEO  
Australia Council

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## Preface

This guide assembles ideas and case study material which demonstrate connections between community cultural development and government ‘wellbeing’ initiatives.

*Art and Wellbeing* uses a concept of wellbeing which builds on a social and environmental view of health, and recognises the inter-relatedness of environmental responsibility, social equity, economic viability and cultural development. These four factors, effectively balanced, have also been considered as the basis of ‘ecologically sustainable development’ (Hawkes, 2001).

The material is relevant for decision-makers concerned with health and wellbeing, integrated approaches to policy, planning and service delivery, ecologically sustainable development, natural resources management, rural revitalisation, community strengthening, active citizenship and diversity and inclusion.

Australian and overseas research (see Appendix 1) shows that direct involvement by communities in arts activity can contribute significantly to individual and community wellbeing and can enhance the efforts of government agencies in realising their policies for community wellbeing and ecologically sustainable communities. The case studies presented here demonstrate that community-based creative processes, when embedded into an agency’s policies and strategies, can be very powerful in strengthening the knowledge, engagement, social capital and leadership required to achieve policy objectives.

In 2002 the Community Cultural Development Board (CCDB) of the Australia Council commissioned research to explore the effect of its funding on the policies and programs of those government agencies concerned with community wellbeing. This research and consultation included round-table meetings with representatives from key community and government agencies, and extensive interviews with government agencies and cultural organisations.

The research identified a number of policy themes associated with community wellbeing—themes that are currently ‘top of mind’ in many spheres of government. The research also assembled case studies which show how participatory arts activities in the community have been applied to these policy themes.

The case studies explore:

- how community cultural development initiatives can be integral parts of far-reaching government strategies
- the potential for community cultural development processes to enrich the policies and actions being taken on some of Australia’s most complex social, environmental and economic challenges
- the way business, government and community organisations can become involved in community cultural development as a means of building trust, knowledge and social capital as preconditions for joint decision-making about complex issues
- the potential for community cultural development to influence the conduct and meaning of cross-sectoral, whole-of-government approaches.

The case study material in *Art and Wellbeing* is certainly not a complete guide to community cultural development and wellbeing activity. For every program or project included, many others could have easily come in alongside. Instead the aim is to explore what could be termed ‘diagnostic’ examples, those case studies best able to demonstrate the viability and potential of community cultural development in achieving and challenging government policy and decision-making.

The scope of this project did not permit engagement with the educational sector. However it is important to recognise the relevance of federal and state government arts in education strategies to the art and wellbeing agenda. Similarly, some of the most successful work in integrating community cultural development with other policies and disciplines is being done in the local government sector and, while not the subject of specific inquiry for this project, this work should also be acknowledged.

The consultation with key community and government agencies revealed a growing awareness of the significance of culture as a factor in wellbeing and an interest in integrating cultural development into those government policies and strategies concerned with wellbeing. On the basis of this interest, the CCDB has resolved to enter into a number of strategic alliances with government agencies working in the area of wellbeing and interested in embedding community cultural development practice into their policies and strategies.

The CCDB is continuing to assemble case study material which explores the connection between art and wellbeing and invites you to provide it with details of additional programs and projects. Individuals and organisations interested in pursuing art and wellbeing partnerships are also welcome to contact the CCDB.

## Introducing Community Cultural Development

Since its establishment 30 years ago, the CCDB of the Australia Council has been instrumental in the development and support of what has become known as community cultural development. Initially the CCDB was responsible for implementing that part of the Australia Council's Charter to do with ensuring that Australians have opportunities to access and participate in the arts.

This focus has evolved into support aimed at strengthening the capacities of communities to develop and express their own cultures. Community cultural development has come to be understood as a collective process, often involving creativity interpreted in the broadest sense. This contributes to changes in people's lives and long-term developmental benefits for a community. Meanwhile the relationship between artist and community has become a partnership rather than the 'expert' sharing with the 'amateur'.

In practice, community cultural development involves a wide range of art forms, from performance to visual arts, from film and video to writing, oral history and storytelling. Its creative outcomes may be everything from public art to festivals, theatre and dance performances, exhibitions, publications and seminars. All of these activities, and there are many others that could be mentioned, have in common the collaborative and empowering processes by which participants engage with creative activity.

Throughout this evolving practice, communities and artists across the country have developed a wide range of collaborative programs and projects. These have involved health centres, multicultural organisations, prisons, public housing agencies, environmentalists, educationalists, trade unions, local governments, urban planners, youth centres and women's groups: communities all eager to use a range of creative processes, to develop skills and express their concerns and aspirations to a wider audience.

The art and wellbeing practice described in this guide arises from such work.

## Art and Wellbeing: securing the connections

In tackling complex social, environmental and economic problems affecting community wellbeing, governments have begun to find that an integrated and whole-of-government approach is necessary, one which links policy, planning and delivery mechanisms between government agencies and between different spheres of government.

As they address these complexities, some agencies question orthodox policy approaches which subsume social and environmental issues beneath economic concerns and which rely primarily on economic measures to deliver results.

From this re-examination, the balanced integration of social, economic and environmental dimensions is gaining recognition as a vital first step towards community wellbeing and ecological sustainability. This new balancing act often requires the reformation and/or extension of ideas and information, the establishment of shared understandings of the meaning of sustainability and the building of shared commitment to solutions. But there are barriers to reaching these shared understandings and solutions.

For example, conflict can arise between centralised decision-making processes and bottom-up processes of community-based decision-making. The institutions charged with the responsibility for policy development and resource allocation can seem remote from and insensitive to the interests of local communities. Often the way knowledge is made and used is important in this:

- There can be an over-reliance on technical knowledge.
- Decision-making may privilege one type of knowledge over another (for example, scientific knowledge over lay or Indigenous knowledge).
- There may be competing knowledge bases, with a lack of connection between expert systems and localised interest groups.
- There can be poor communication of technical knowledge.

Another key problem is that the centralisation of power can act to prevent communities from expressing their values, realising self-determination and achieving their sense of identity. Because of this, some government agencies now acknowledge community engagement, also known as active citizenship or participatory democracy, as a building block for sustainability and wellbeing. They recognise that only by engaging people in active debate on the kind of society they want will people and communities explore and clarify their values, their goals and the means to achieve them.

However, attempts to engage communities in this way have encountered difficulties. Again, the centralised way in which policy is developed and resources are controlled works against these community-based processes and contributes to distrust of government and business and inertia at the community level. These feelings of alienation can be particularly acute for marginalised groups.

### Responding to complexity—culture and values

The search for more integrated methods of providing ecological sustainability and wellbeing has already led to the development of partnerships between government, business and the not-for profit sectors. But effective responses require new ways of thinking and new ways for governments to go about their business. This in turn has implications for:

- our social structures
- our relationship with the natural environment
- the scale, scope and structure of economic activity
- what and how we learn
- our planning and governance structures and processes.

This will mean the reform of our basic institutions and systems. These structural reforms will require profound **cultural** changes in our society, changes which cannot happen without a shift in our **values**. Our institutions—both government and business—need to engage communities in ways that allow them to express their values and sense of identity, to embrace new policy approaches and to achieve self-determination.

A society's values are the basis upon which all else is built. These values and the way they are expressed are a society's culture. The way a society governs itself cannot be fully democratic without there being clear avenues for the expression of community values, and unless these expressions directly affect the directions society takes. These processes are culture at work. (Hawkes, 2001)

### The role of community cultural development

If governments wish to more effectively enhance community wellbeing, they need to recognise or incorporate the community's culture (and thus values) within government policies and strategies. They can do this through participatory creative processes.

Community cultural development uses involvement in artistic and other creative processes as a way of exploring and expressing our cultures and the values underpinning these cultures and our society. Community cultural development processes can therefore play a vital role in helping people to think critically about their experiences.

It is in the act of creativity that empowerment lies, and through sharing creativity that understanding [is] promoted. (Matarasso, 1997)

Active engagement in intellectual and artistic activities is one way in which we can re-evaluate our perceived reality, and our collective habits of thinking and acting. This engagement can expose communities and decision-makers to previously unimaginable ideas which challenge our values, leading to personal growth, lifelong learning and change.

In considering the role of community cultural development, it is useful to distinguish between **instrumental** approaches which involve the arts ('let's implement policy using the arts') and **transformational** approaches ('let's allow creative activity to help determine policy, negotiate shared understandings and map out solutions').

The instrumental approaches are reasonably well known. The arts are already well recognised as an effective 'tool' for educating and raising awareness of particular issues. As examples, they have been used for civic enhancement, as a way of building self-confidence and engagement with the wider community, or as a way of revitalising a local economy. However, this instrumental role is only half the story, and, as the case studies in this volume show, engagement in community cultural development processes can achieve and challenge government policy and decision-making through *both* instrumental and transformational approaches.

The transformational role of community cultural development would see it encourage fundamental shifts in policy processes, agency structures, modes of decision-making and attitudes. Australian government agencies should embrace the opportunities which community cultural development provides, to change habits of thinking and acting by galvanising community involvement and engendering debate ... debate which has implications for agencies' core activities.

By going further than instrumental applications of the arts, transformational creative processes can unlock new solutions to the challenges agencies face in the pursuit of community wellbeing and ecologically sustainable development.

## Transformational approaches—knowledge, trust and social capital

Because they foster trust between individuals and organisations, collective cultural processes can assist in engendering debate, making knowledge, illuminating divergence, and highlighting consensus around shared meaning, purpose and values.

For example, the knowledge-building functions of community arts projects, such as those approaches identified in several of our case studies, would seem to be of great value in decision-making contexts. This is because different knowledge bases (the lay versus the scientific, the local versus the universal/global) need to be synthesised into practical solutions that work at the level of individual communities, but also make sense at the state, national and international levels.

The case studies in this guide also show that arts organisations can be very effective in creating both types of social capital—*bonding* and *bridging*.

‘Bonding social capital’ refers to the strong ties within localised communities and relies on a sense of personal and collective trust and the development of shared values within groups. Such outcomes are not only cornerstones of community cultural development, but also important pre-conditions for policy and action in non-arts sectors. As community knowledge and trust grow, people discover new solutions and establish a shared commitment to those values, goals and means of achieving them. These improved participatory practices can enhance the capacity for change and resolve and/or avoid conflicts likely to arise in the promotion of policy changes.

‘Bridging social capital’ is sometimes regarded as the glue which connects *between* diverse community groups (Flowers and McEwen, 2003). But it can also mean a more specialised form of bridging: between localised groups and *expert systems*, such as those systems utilised by agencies charged with managing wellbeing issues and informed by expert knowledge. Arts projects which originate at the local level can achieve significant advances in wellbeing for individuals and communities. But they can also have important influences in state and/or federal decision-making forums, through deliberate strategies that link communities, and which transport participants, ideas and creative outputs into the decision-making realm of government agencies. This can resolve the tension that exists between centralised decision-making processes and bottom-up processes of community-based decision-making. Several of our case studies show how community cultural development can achieve such transformations.

## Case studies

Our case study material supports and elaborates on the above arguments. The examples are grouped under seven themes, which represent key priorities for governments in Australia in achieving community wellbeing:

1. Health—including social, environmental and clinical policy approaches
2. Ecologically Sustainable Development—meeting the needs of current and future generations through simultaneous environmental, social and economic development, and through natural resource management
3. Public Housing and Place—integrated approaches to public housing development in major cities
4. Rural Revitalisation—particularly within rural and regional Australia
5. Community Strengthening—government initiatives aimed at increasing a community’s capacity to resolve its social, economic or environmental issues
6. Active Citizenship—greater involvement of citizens and communities in government processes
7. Social Inclusion and Cultural Diversity—strategies to overcome barriers based on gender, ethnicity, race, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, mental health or disability.

## Moving forward

The full potential of community cultural development is achieved when it is effectively integrated into the way in which an agency goes about its business. The case studies demonstrate how this is already happening. A five stage scheme for integrating community cultural development is set out in Appendix 2, while Appendix 3 presents sample proposals suggesting how integration might be achieved in future programs. In practice, much will depend on how aware the agency is of the potential of community cultural development strategies and whether it appreciates the relevance of these strategies to its objectives. Another variable will be whether everyone within the agency supports these collaborative creative processes, or whether support comes only from one or two individuals. Finally, inclusion of community cultural development in the agency’s policies, budgeting and strategies is further evidence of effective integration.