



# 6

*active citizenship*

## 6. Active Citizenship

**In complex community development work, all the objectives depend on the capacity of individual citizens to take action which will effect change. Agencies recognise and value this, and are using community cultural development processes to foster the greater involvement of citizens in government processes. The case study to demonstrate this is:**

### Small Towns Big Picture

Rural development objectives have been approached through an integrated and wide-ranging community cultural development program which emphasises leadership and active citizenship.

American political scientist Robert Putnam describes the need for a strong, active civil society to make democracy work (Putnam, 1993). Trust in government has been proposed as one indicator of strong social capital (Cox, 1995). An active civil society therefore requires trust in governance structures and processes.

An active citizen ... is someone who not only believes in the concept of democratic society but who is willing and able to translate that belief into action. Active citizenship is a compound of knowledge, skills and attitudes: knowledge about how society works; the skills needed to participate effectively; and a conviction that active participation is the right of citizens. (Education for Active Citizenship, Senate Standing Committee on Employment, Education and Training, 1989)

In broadest terms, active citizenship can involve citizens in the development and implementation of policies, programs and services. However, active citizenship policy initiatives are more often characterised by a continuum of engagement ranging from information-sharing to consultation to involvement in policy development and decision-making processes. Community engagement approaches therefore can include:

- open and localised meetings of councils, parliaments and cabinets
- Internet broadcasting of parliamentary and council proceedings
- community forums or reference panels—physical meetings and online
- online engagement through e-petitions, online consultation and a community engagement website
- strategies for improving internal procedures, for example, public access to information, better sharing of resources and information between government

agencies to help overcome ‘consultation fatigue’ arising from single agency/department consultation sessions.

The Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) endorsed active citizen participation in its 1997 Declaration of the Role of Australian Local Government which commits local governments to the encouragement of ‘non-discriminatory participation of all citizens in building democratic communities which share power and ensure more equitable allocation of community resources’. The Community Indicators and Local Democracy Project, a partnership between Swinburne University of Technology, the University of NSW, Oslo University, the ALGA and some Australian local councils is helping to identify and audit local democratic participatory processes. The Australian Citizenship Council has recommended a number of basic principles be recognised as defining Australia’s civic culture (LGCSAA, 2001).

Collective creative processes, in conjunction with other initiatives, can be a means of tackling serious social problems and the disempowerment that results from them. Whatever peoples’ social or economic situation, people do, and always will develop their own creative resources, but they need support and access to wider cultural and civic discourse. However, these processes will founder unless there is community confidence that they can influence policy and resource allocation outcomes, and this requires commitment from policy institutions.

The achievement of ecologically sustainable development and community wellbeing will require structural change, changes to our economic, social and environmental management systems, which will, in turn, require the relinquishment of power and potential disadvantage for some.

Finding a way forward in these circumstances is even more urgent given that issues surrounding consultation and communication with, and between, stakeholders are presently among the most urgent and unresolved areas of policy, particularly in regional Australia. In many areas the stresses of coping in a fast, changing environment have been such as to cause people to ‘shut down’. Communication on policies and community strategies has become difficult in many areas and in many cases, old ways of communicating are no longer effective. (Kingma, 2003b)

Community cultural development processes can nurture local democracy by encouraging people to become more active citizens. It does this not just by giving people the personal and practical skills, but by opening up routes to wider democratic processes and encouraging in people the desire to participate.

The case study demonstrates:

- how the engagement of citizens in community cultural development activities has transformed them from passive consumers to engaged participants and ultimately leaders, thereby building confidence among individuals and in the community
- how community cultural development can transform citizens' perceptions of public agencies and local councils
- the way active citizenship (through community cultural development) has been a means of tackling serious social and environmental problems
- why community cultural development allows people to achieve real democratic activity.



**Right:** *Energy Footprints*, from Small Towns Big Pictures project. Photo: Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities.

## Small Towns Big Picture

**Some of the issues confronting small rural communities have been described elsewhere in this guide (for example, see *Rural Revitalisation* starting on page 62), and strategies to strengthen communities have been presented in several previous case studies. This example, which considers an integrated arts and community development project in five rural Victorian towns, concentrates on the implications of community cultural development for the role of individuals as 'active citizens'.**

Small Towns Big Picture was a community development process focusing on the development of social, environmental and economic sustainability indicators. The program was initiated by the Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities at the Bendigo campus of La Trobe University, and run in partnership with the Victorian Cultural Development Network.

Progress indicators for social cohesion, energy use and economic activity were seen as essential for 'Triple Bottom Line' evaluation—in this case a community audit bringing together social, environmental and economic dimensions of analysis and policy-making. The indicators were seen as a vital first step towards developing action plans which would revitalise communities (Rogers and Ryan, 2001).

The Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities had previously worked with small communities in a project aimed at achieving economic and employment outcomes. Although this initial project established links between the Centre and rural communities, assessments indicated only partial success in engaging community members in the process (Rogers, 2003).

What happened next owes something to the recent flourishing of ideas about the importance of culture as a 'fourth pillar' underpinning sustainable development, alongside social, economic and environmental dimensions. Initiatives by Victoria's Cultural

### Small Towns Big Picture

The project originated from three research and strategic planning needs:

- a community cohesion index
- an energy footprint measure
- an economic activity measure.

The community cultural development approach involved, for example:

- development of a theatrical performance reflecting the issues identified through the development of a community cohesion indicator
- creation of prints, photographs and ceramic tiles reflecting the energy footprint and impact of towns on the environment
- development of an interactive website depicting organisational networks within each community
- participation by people of all ages, and a wide range of community groups from five towns in rural Victoria.
- creative workshops across a range of visual and performing arts, e.g. 30 workshops engaging hundreds of schoolchildren, teachers and parents.

(Rogers, 2003)

Development Network, including a pivotal publication by commentator Jon Hawkes and a number of strategic forums, lent encouragement to a new approach in Central Victoria.

For Small Towns Big Picture, the Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities commissioned eight community artists to work alongside researchers and the community. What began as a project about analysis and strategic planning for

social, economic and environmental success, would now use culture as the means to promote wide engagement of community members. Ultimately some 1500 people became actively involved in the program, from the towns of Dunolly, Wedderburn, Carisbrook, Talbot and Maldon (Rogers, 2003).

Small Towns Big Picture is an ongoing initiative that has already generated ideas and

expectations that are being acted upon at the local level. McKinnon provides a useful summary of achievements:

In Dunolly for example, a local energy committee is using data collected and interpreted through the project to inform discussions with the Bendigo Bank and CSIRO directed at the establishment of a Community Power Company and the trialling of hydrogen cell technologies at the local hospital. In Carisbrook, the project created impetus for a successful campaign to restore the local Town Hall. In Wedderburn, the local council is incorporating artworks produced through the project within a community garden, and the principal of the high school is planning new projects involving local artists. At the more macro level, La Trobe University is developing a new series of local workshops to audit economic performance and identify opportunities for replacing imported goods and services with local produce. In all of the towns involved, new ideas and a creative energy is evident. (McKinnon, 2003)

But it is also apparent that the capacity of individual citizens to take action has been greatly enhanced by Small Towns Big Picture.

Community cultural development was the vehicle that enabled people to come to the party. Previously they were not buying in, but arts raised their energy and excitement.

*Maureen Rogers from the Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities*

#### For further information

##### Website:

[www.latrobe.edu.au/csrc](http://www.latrobe.edu.au/csrc)

##### Key publications:

Hawkes, Jon (2001), *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's essential role in public planning*, Common Ground Publishing and Community Cultural Development Network, Victoria.

McKinnon, Malcolm (2003), 'Small Towns, Big Picture: art, social research and community development', *Artwork*, Issue 55, May.

Rogers, Maureen (2003), 'Does Cultural Activity Make a Difference to Community Capacity? A key question addressed by the Small Towns: Big Picture project', Presented to the *Just and Vibrant Communities Conference*, National Congress of Local Government Managers, Townsville.

Rogers, Maureen and Ryan, Roberta (2001) 'The Triple Bottom Line for Sustainable Community Development', *Local Environment Journal*, Vol. 6(3).

#### Small Towns Big Picture: Active citizenship outcomes

- high levels of engagement by community members in a social research and planning exercise
- community members with new levels of confidence to take on leadership positions within their towns (based on a survey of project participants)
- a large number of individuals motivated to conduct a second stage project: the development of action plans aimed at improving on the initial benchmark performance measures.
- a number of activities already initiated since Stage 1 which have been driven by newly committed community members; for example, the first meeting to discuss the Dunolly energy initiative attracted a record 70 people
- such activity suggests people are better connected, more inspired and more confident.

*(Rogers, 2003)*