



## **Discussion Paper: Establishment of a Network of ABCDE Community Building Learning Sites Across Australia**

### **Preamble:**

During August 2015, the Bank of I.D.E.A.S. (BOI) and the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV) organised a nationwide tour by Cormac Russell from Nurture Development (ND), based in the United Kingdom (UK). The focus of the tour was to contribute to the strengthening of the philosophy and practice of Asset Based Community Driven Efforts (ABCDE) in Australia (also known as ABCD – Asset Based Community Development). A wide range of practitioners involved in community building initiatives supported by local councils, NGOs, community banks, faith communities and community based organisations benefited from the wisdom and experiences of Cormac, and many became energised and excited by the approach of ‘*ABCDE Learning Sites*’ that currently operate across the UK. Subsequently, many groups have enquired about the possibility of a similar networking framework in Australia, while stressing the need to be respectful of local cultures, contexts and histories. Appendix 1 is a statement by Cormac Russell that outlines why there is a need for a strong and focused emphasis on place-based community ABCDE building.

### **ABCDE Learning Sites Approach:**

In summary, ND has supported the establishment and development of 12 Learning Sites across the UK, with the expressed intent of creating at the neighbourhood level, exemplary projects that promote rural and urban asset based community building practice and revitalisation efforts.

The core strength of the ABCDE Learning Site approach is that it enables people to change practice by practicing the change. In essence the approach operates to six principles:

1. Every context is different, the challenge being to learn what works best for each unique location. While the Asset Based Community Development approach, known as ABCD, is an internationally respected and tested model that operates to a set of principles and emerging practices, it is not a defined ‘*cookie cutter*’ model – it is place based, adaptive, responsive and innovative in a way that closed models cannot be.
2. The wisdom of local people always exceeds the knowledge of the experts.
3. Relationship building is viewed as the fundamental activity of community building.
4. The starting point for community building is ‘*what’s strong, not wrong*’, thus the focus on assets, capacities, abilities and possibilities, rather than needs, disabilities and problems.
5. The challenge is for community members to move from being treated as customers, consumers, clients and patients in others’ programs and services, to co-owners, co-

producers and citizens in the design and implementation of actions that build their communities as healthy, caring and inclusive places and groups.

6. Peer to peer learning and sharing across the Network is actively promoted and viewed as the critical learning approach.

A typical Learning Cluster would consist of 2-5 sites/communities - neighbourhoods or rural communities with 100 - 3000 people per site/community. Each site/community forms a local *Community Builder Team* (7-12 members), often created as a sub group from an existing group like a Residents Association or identified through a facilitated local workshop.

A *Community Connector* is recruited to work part time with the Community Builder Team to provide some additional operational “*arms and legs*”. In the UK, three approaches have emerged: 1) the Community Connector is funded by a grant from local government, community bank, philanthropic group or local community 2) an existing natural community builder is located from within the community who has their salary topped up e.g. a local pastor who receives an additional £4K on-top of their annual stipend from the Church in return for taking on more of an active role as a Community Connector. 3) Someone who is a natural community connector, but who is currently employed to do something else like a district nurse, and is released by their organisation for a set period to work as a Community Connector.

The Community Builder Team, with the support of the Community Connector begin intentionally to map, connect, mobilise and celebrate the assets of their place through conversation and social interaction activities. They engage with local associations and groups. They work towards mobilising more community led activity, but also towards the development of a network of associations and a community vision, which as well as spelling out what the community wants to see happen over the next ten years, breaks those ambitions down into what the community can do themselves, what they can do, but need some help and what they need outside agencies to deliver.

Bank of I.D.E.A.S. will provide a mentoring, training and network coordination role in relation to all these communities (see range of support below), as well as supporting the learning process for a minimum of two years.

### **Support from ND, BOI and MAV**

As a partnership, Nurture Development, Bank of I.D.E.A.S, and the MAV, will put their real-time know-how and experience at the disposal of interested local governments, community banks, NGOs, community organisations and faith communities with a view to creating a set of Learning Sites across Australia. Each Learning Cluster and their set of Sites will be offered a minimum of two years mentoring and training support. Clusters and Sites can choose from a range of support options that could include any of the following:

- a. A Tool Box of practical tools, support materials and resources related to asset-mapping, hosting learning conversations, finding Community Connectors, starting relational conversations, running ABCDE facilitation, developing local leadership, using local media etc. These will be constantly added to; as new practices emerge from the each of the Learning Sites. Learning Clusters and Sites will operate to an open source ethos, which each Learning Cluster and Site is expected to contribute to and benefit from the common wealth of knowledge and resources that accrue.

- b. The provision of experienced ABCDE Guides (who is directly trained and mentored by ND and BOI) for up to 20 days a year.
- c. On-line support through a digital sharing platform known as the *Digital Village*, webinars and facilitated discussion forums. Webinars will run on a monthly basis and will include speakers from all over the world whom are considered to have something to offer our community building efforts. Learning Clusters and their Sites will also be asked to facilitate webinars with a view to sharing their learning.
- d. Participation in an annual National Learning Sites Gathering and State Gatherings.
- e. The provision of a participatory Learning/Evaluation framework, which will include training and support, so that each Learning Site can use the framework to capture their emerging story.
- f. The Provision of '*Story Harvesting*' training with a view to support the gathering and sharing of their emerging stories.
- g. Access to on-line and real-time face to face facilitated Peer-to-Peer Learning Site sharing sessions.
- h. Support in establishing a Community of Practice.
- i. One to one support for innovators within organisations who wish to explore how they can use their institutional assets to build community and create community alternative to standardised services.
- j. Support in discovering and supporting Community Builders and recruitment and the training of Community Connectors.
- k. Support for communities in formulating community visions through community planning sessions that lead to total-place transformation.

### **The ABCDE Learning Cluster Requirements:**

While each Learning Cluster will be unique in nature, each will require the support of a host/ anchor organisation(s) like a local council, community bank, NGO, faith community or community-based organisation will need to fulfill the following –

- a) Enlist two to four interested communities/sites - neighbourhoods or small towns (pop: 100 - 3,000 per community). Interest can be established on the basis of having between 7 to 12 Community Builders who are prepared to contribute their time to initiate a community conversation with their neighbours about the skills, gifts and talents of their community. They will do this with the support of a part time Community Connector. This ensures that the process is community led and the community holds what is learned.
- b) The Community Connector must be accepted, and ideally chosen by the community. Community Connectors are found in at least three distinct ways: a) Create a dedicated funding stream and work with the Community Builder Team to recruit a salaried person to the new post. b) Recruit someone who is already undertaking community connector type roles and top-up their salary. c) Invite a person already working effectively in the community, with the support of their organisation to assume this role, but to continue to be paid by their organisation. This might be thought of as a secondment arrangement.
- c) An active willingness to support the establishment of a ABCDE Learning Cluster and participate in a community of practice which will be dedicated to learning how best to advance and deepen community building practice.

- d) A willingness to accept mentoring and training, and to share all experiences with other Learning Clusters and Sites and the wider national and international ABCDE learning community.
- e) A willingness to actively participate in and contribute to a peer-to-peer network across Australia, and globally.
- f) A willingness to fulfil a two-year commitment, subject to positive evaluation at the end of year one.

### **Participation Cost:**

Recognising that Australian communities are at different stages in terms of their ABCD community building experiences, and have varying financial capacities and contexts, a range of participation options are available. For more information on pricing, please contact Maria D'Souza at [md@bankofideas.com.au](mailto:md@bankofideas.com.au)

Any pricing options excludes the cost of employing or seconding part time Community Connectors.

Depending on the physical location of Learning Sites, some negotiation on travel and accommodation costs for ABCDE Guides may be additional.

### **Further Information:**

For further information, or to register interest, please contact Peter Kenyon (Bank of I.D.E.A.S.) at [pk@bankofideas.com.au](mailto:pk@bankofideas.com.au) or 0417183719 or Maria D'Souza on 0404 957 80 or [md@bankofideas.com.au](mailto:md@bankofideas.com.au)



## **Appendix 1: Why Place Such a Strong and Focused Emphasis on Place-based Community Building?**

The root causes of the vast majority of socio-economic and political issues are: disconnection and inequality. Research shows the best way to address this disconnect is as close to people's doorsteps as possible, since people will engage and connect around the things they care about, and most people will mobilise around the things that are close to home.

Despite this fact, most approaches advanced by many Governmental and Non-Governmental agencies alike, fail to be place-based and do not directly address disconnection, which is to say they do not go to the root of these problems. Preferring instead the futile and non-sustainable approaches that seek to address only the symptoms. Addiction, youth issues, the challenges synonymous with ageing populations, poor health outcomes and health inequality, public safety issues, ecological and environmental threats, and economic crisis all require a more concerted approach that builds on indigenous capacities to co-create a better future at local level. In other words, a community building process is required. That community-building process must come from inside out of the communities, where people live, sleep and work. Currently the solutions that dominate are top-down, and outside in.

We call this alternative grassroots approach: Community Building instead of Community Development to emphasize that our approach seeks primarily to work with what is within the community already before focusing on external resources. By changing the sequences, from focusing on leveraging external resources first, to a focus on internal resources as a starting point, when outside support is leveraged it will come as a sustainable match and will help build an enduring legacy.

Over the last twenty years (at least), instead of supporting the building of communities at neighbourhood level, many helping organizations have unintentionally done the opposite. Instead of supporting citizens to organize and come together as the primary inventors in their local communities and in democracy more generally, professionals have endeavoured to become the inventors themselves. Though well intentioned, through programmes, services and interventions many Public Sector and Third Sector organisations have treated the people they serve as passive recipients, instead of as citizens.

Hence today, the most pressing challenge now facing Local Government is not to turn active citizens into satisfied clients; it is in fact the opposite: to support people to journey from being clients to being citizens, the primary producers of future. While this is a perennial task, the urgency of rebooting Local Government and its partners to this task could not be greater. It would also appear that the interest in developing this way of working is high.

Now more than ever we need to reboot Local Government and helping agencies so that they can re-orientate themselves towards their primary function: to support citizenship and community building. Placing the provision of services and programmes in an important but non-dominant position to community building is critical to the future of local democracy. The current assumption that services and programmes will be sufficient in addressing our most pressing challenges is ubiquitous at almost every level of society. The issue is not just that these technocratic programmes are not always fit for purpose; it is more fundamental than that.

The assumption that the provision of better services is commensurate with increased individual and population wellbeing is misguided and runs contrary to great preponderance of scientific evidence.

Epidemiology (the scientific study of what determines human wellbeing) for example is clear that the primary determinants of our wellbeing are:

1. Personal agency
2. Associational life
3. Economic status
4. Environmental conditions

In short our community assets primarily determine the extent to which we are well and how quickly we recover when unwell. Of course institutions have a role to play in supporting our wellbeing but it is not a primary one. Institutions are not the primary producers of our health, wellbeing, wisdom, prosperity, justice or democracy, communities are.

Over the last two decades however, in the areas of health and wellbeing, education, local economics, environment, justice and public safety the primary role of community assets has been relegated to second place, with services and programmes in the ascendancy as the dominant drivers. Institutions have taken the place of citizens as the primary inventors of the solutions to social and political problems. Accordingly, health, which is primarily a social and political matter, has come to be thought of as a medical one, and technocratic solutions have come to be considered more desirable and trustworthy than the tacit knowledge of citizens and communities.

Indeed across a wide range of issues, from gang crime to dementia, the dominant assumption is that where a social problem exists, generating a solution is the primary responsibility of one institution or other (and more recently of a cluster of institutions working in concert). Yet the evidence clearly shows that this sequence is not only out of whack with what science tells us it is also counterproductive, in that instead of empowering citizens and communities, it is increasing dependency on institutions (institutionalisation) and decreasing interdependency in community life. Ultimately, it defines democracy as Government centric, instead of citizen centered.

A movement of citizens and civic-minded public servants in the United Kingdom and Australia is gathering pace and they are growing in their resolve to face this challenge. In Australia, inspired by an approach that Nurture Development has stewarded across the UK, a number of Local Governments, Community Banks and Third Sector organisations are eager to advance a process that restores a balance between services and community building. The innovation of this approach is that instead of attempting to reform institutional systems, services and programmes, it emphasises the need to expand civic space and authority in community to grow interdependency and collective agency. Stronger communities in turn hold their agencies, leaders and governments to account, and form meaningful partnerships to co-produce change. But they also take ownership of the civic work that communities do best.

Civic practitioners in turn aim to support citizen led invention. That process requires intentional community building, since the assets of many communities lie hidden in plain view. Helping communities make the invisible visible is therefore the first step. We believe

this can be achieved by supporting interested neighbourhoods to employ a community builder; their primary role is to serve the community. Put simply they will not have any pre-engagement agendas as defined by outside agencies, such as health, youth, ageing well etc., their brief is just to connect, across parts of the neighbourhood. This is a radical form of inclusion that seeks to grow interdependence in community life and reduce institutionalization among those who have become most marginalized.

Cormac Russell, CEO, Nurture Development