Social Investment in Community Services  
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Social Impacts of Economic Growth Forum  
20-21 August 2007  
Mackay

Social investment in community services may be perceived to be about giving money to organisations that work with the community’s disadvantaged. However, while increased financial resources are obviously vital to an organisation’s functioning, there are other forms of social investment that produce more sustainable results. Community organisations are generally very good at providing excellent services with minimal resources. They also have a diverse range of skills and considerable knowledge about the communities they work in. The best return on investment in community services would:

- use their knowledge of the community, so that more effective community programs can be developed, and stronger communities can evolve
- develop stronger, proactive community organisations that are less reliant on government support

Basically, community service organisations need a hand up, not a handout. By contributing to more efficient and effective community services, you also contribute to stronger communities with less disadvantage and enhanced liveability.

This paper will give an outline of the nature of community services and the role they play. This will then be set within the context of the economic growth and population expansion currently being experienced in this region. Strategies to support the sustainability of community organisations will be suggested, with a focus on development of a collaborative partnership that will be structured to provide benefits from both the process and the outcomes. While long-term commitment will be required, the benefits can contribute to the sustainability of both business and community service organisations, as well as the liveability of the region. A key feature of this partnership would be that it ensures social development occurs in tandem with economic growth, so that negative impacts can be minimised and a stronger regional community evolves.

Community services are provided by a range of different organisations across our region, including non-government nonprofit organisations (hereafter called community based organisations), government organisations and for-profit organisations. The services provided include assistance for youth, people with disabilities, family support (such as supporting domestic violence victims), women, the aged, people who are homeless or at risk of homelessness, or community development activities. The 2006 Queensland Community Services Sector Mapping Report states that in 2000, there were a total of 1888 organisations providing community services in Queensland, 1318 were community based nonprofit services, 73 were government organisations, and 497 were for-profit organisations (such as child care and aged care services). Government funding equates to about 70% of the revenue of community based nonprofit organisations, and about 75% of their costs were staff wages. Approximately 578 million dollars was also offered through Qld Government grants and subsidies.
The Australian Council of Social Service conducts an annual Australian Community Sector Survey. Over the financial years 2004-05 and 2004-05, the two major issues highlighted by organisations across the nation were the greater complexity of client needs (65%), and a lack of resources (77%). From the Queensland organisations who responded, a 7% increase in demand on services was identified, with 30,016 more people accessing assistance. A further 22,237 people were turned away because the organisation was already working at maximum capacity and had to ration access. The most needed services in this period were long-term housing and health care (including drug and alcohol and mental health services). During this period, an overall increase of 599 full time equivalent employees was identified across survey respondents. At the same time however, the number of people assisted increased by 9%. Similarly, expenditure grew at 8.2% over this period, while growth in income stood at 7.5%. 75% of survey respondents also agreed that unfunded work (by staff and volunteers) had increased in their organisations.

Nonprofit organisations are generally contracted to government funding over one to three year time periods, with specific service provision targets, and a range of administrative and reporting expectations. Generally, funding is provided for service provision only, not co-ordination or development of the organisation itself. All monies must also be allocated by the end of each financial year, with surpluses returned to the funding body. While accountability for appropriate use of public funds is vital, short-term funding tends to create an environment of uncertainty, and is a disincentive for long-term planning and organisational growth. As a result, most funded organisations cannot offer competitive wages or long-term career paths. Within this environment however, according to Eva Cox, non-government organisations have adapted to develop skills in creativity and innovation around service provision, as well as flexibility and responsiveness. They also generally demonstrate the capacity to reflect local needs and create relationships of trust with members and users.

The audience today includes people from several different industries, in government and non-government roles, and the language used in community services may be foreign to some. To clarify, the primary focus of this report is community based organisations (nonprofit non-government organisations), since they provide the bulk of community services in this region. There are other generalised terms that may be used in this paper. For example, the term “industry” can encompass a diverse range of small and medium sized businesses in Mackay, Collinsville or Sarina, up to large international mining companies in the Hinterland. It is understood there are significant differences between these organisations, their structure and the challenges they deal with. It is also acknowledged that these assumptions about cohesiveness cannot be made even between organisations within the mining or sectors, or even within the same region. Rather, the Mackay region, and the industries within it, is characterised by diversity and their unique qualities are a result of adaptation to the opportunities and challenges that have presented themselves in this region.
This diversity in the Mackay region includes changing work patterns, which also impacts on community services, the number of people they assist, and their expenditure and income. For example, workers in the Hinterland may be required to live within Mackay, due to lack of housing or workplace expectations. Other people may live in a mining town in the Hinterland, but may still choose to access many services within Mackay. This has an impact on community services in Mackay, that are funded to support people in a specific geographical area, and have not been provided with additional resources to manage these shifting social patterns. This suggests that it is no longer feasible to consider community service delivery solely from a localised perspective. A regional focus is now necessary if community organisations are to meet changing needs and have some chance of sustainability.

It’s also important to first clarify how this paper was developed, and the philosophical basis that underpins it. The framework for this presentation was created by Mackay Regional Council for Social Development (MRCSD), in consultation with representatives from a range of community based organisations across the region. Interviews were then conducted with several industry, local and state government representatives from Mackay, the Hinterland and Whitsundays. MRCSD operates according to a community development philosophy and social justice principles. This includes a belief that local people are best placed to identify needs in their communities, and contribute to decision making about strategies to address these needs. They also have the capacity to develop the skills and knowledge needed to strengthen their own communities. This is essentially a “bottom up” approach, as opposed to a “top down” approach where decisions are made outside or above the local community, and imposed on them. A “bottom up” community development approach therefore suggests that both processes and outcomes are important in the development of a strong community. For example, while physical infrastructure and tangible outcomes are vital, the processes used to create those resources can either support or hinder future growth.

There seems to be a commonly held belief that an economic boom is unquestionably good, the community automatically becomes a desirable place to live and everyone is happy. However, while the current boom in resources in the Mackay region offers significant advantages for a proportion of the community, only one measurement of well-being (economic gain) is being applied, while social well-being has been overlooked. There is some evidence that several communities across the Mackay region have significant levels of economic growth, but the corresponding social cohesion has not evolved, and people are leaving. For example, the sense of ownership in some communities has been eroded and community groups are dwindling, while the number of disadvantaged people is increasing. These include people who are homeless, at risk of homelessness (such as people with disabilities or older people who can no longer afford increasing rents), or victims of domestic violence.

In fact, we have now reached a point where a lack of consideration of social factors within economic growth is impacting on people at all wages levels across the community. For example, long work hours and extended periods of time away from family can create tension within high income families, and may leave little opportunity for consistent
participation in social activities (eg: soccer games, helping out with school fetes, family dinners). Workers can become isolated and bored on their extended days off shift, and there is evidence of increased drug and alcohol abuse in the community. If these workers and their families are new to Mackay, they may also have limited access to family or friends for support. This would suggest that economic development alone is not enough – we need to consider social indicators and ensure that economic and social development occur in tandem to create a community where people want to stay.

Woolcock, Renton and Cavaye (in Stronger Communities Handbook, 2003) state that “increasing evidence shows that social cohesion is critical for societies to prosper economically and for development to be sustainable”. To enable this social cohesion, growth needs to occur within an environment where people from all sectors of a local community have real opportunities and motivation to:

- participate in the community at all levels (eg: playing in the football team, attending community events, voting, going to the local park)
- develop strong networks with others, both horizontally (with their neighbours, friends and colleagues) and vertically (with all levels of government, people from other socio-economic groups, or people with more perceived power)
- engender a sense of ownership of their community (real opportunities to participate, avenues to raise issues, and have them heard and responded to).

Organisations that provide community services are working to address the disadvantage resulting from an economic boom, but they do not have the resources, capacity or authority to identify and implement solutions alone. Some community based organisations have worked on identifying alternative strategies to broaden their income base and encourage sustainability, which have included:

- developing a social enterprise
- establishing corporate community partnerships, such as CQ Rescue
- initiating volunteering programmes with company employees, who are sponsored by their employer

Other strategies that have been suggested include:

- a levee on profits from corporations that is specifically allocated to community based organisations
- a levy on rates, specifically allocated to community based organisations
- tax deductibility of volunteer effort

While these initiatives could provide considerable support to community based organisations, their benefits are generally short-term, not consistent, or require lengthy administrative processes. They also require community based organisations to develop a new set of business skills, create new networks and find the resources to enable this development in the long-term. These activities are quite distinct from a community worker’s core business and areas of expertise. These alternative strategies are therefore only accessible to community based organisations with the additional capacity to resource this diversion from their core service delivery.
Another alternative to addressing this whole-of-community issue is a collaborative approach that includes all relevant partners. Previous efforts to address these issues have included community organisations, government and industry working in isolation, at cross purposes, in direct competition or assuming that others hold responsibility. This collaborative approach is based on the premise that each party is recognised as a vital partner with a distinct role, such as community based organisation, industry, government or community representative. Each role is equally valuable and useful in achieving overall goals, and interactions are based on patience and integrity. As the Business of Social Responsibility describes, “the rise of community partnerships…reflects a growing realisation that individual entities – governments, nonprofits and businesses – which may have acted independently of one another in the past, can often create better results when working together” (BSR Website, 2003).

The use of a collaborative process assumes that each partner has a vested interest in the sustainability of the community and it relies on development of long-term relationships and trust. It is not intended to replace current levels of government funding or other valuable initiatives provided by the corporate sector. Rather, a collaborative partnership should value-add to current activities, and facilitate gaining synergetic benefits from their combined efforts.

While this process implies shared responsibility for addressing whole-of-community issues, there are also important benefits for each partner, and the community. For community based organisations, these include:

- ensuring the issues faced by the most disadvantaged are heard and addressed
- access to a broader range of resources and expertise
- opportunities to work with more flexibility and innovation
- financial resources can be prioritised across the region
- diversification of income sources, providing greater long-term stability

Governments benefit through:

- provision of more efficient services that meet the identified needs of community
- opportunity to draw on expertise, innovation and alternative perspectives of industry
- opportunity to provide funding to initiatives that have been developed regionally, to meet needs identified by regional community members

For industry, there are also numerous benefits, which have been identified from a range of sources (BSR 2003, Bruce & Brerton, 2005, Tuck, Lowe & McRae-Williams, 2005), as:

- enhanced risk management practices
- better able to anticipate and resolve problems as they arise
- more likely to be “given a second chance”
- nonprofit organisations can act as a barometer to measure a company’s reputation, test opinions and assess options
- continued broad license to operate
- build reputation, so mine has future support
• more local geographical knowledge
• community and employee endorsement
• Reduced financial volatility
• Become ‘developer of choice’
• Attract and retain skilled workforce, particularly from the local region

While there may be advantages for individual partners, it is important to remember that the primary basis for the collaborative partnership is the collective benefits for the community. This is important because it is only by progressing towards community goals (including both the process and the outcomes) that benefits for individual partners can be realised.

It is acknowledged that there are some significant barriers to this collaborative approach, including recognising power imbalances between the partners, and how to manage these to ensure shared accountability and benefits. There could also be difficulties in developing sustainable processes for working together and engaging with others, and maintaining relationships in the long-term. Complexities would also need to be managed around developing trust, and dealing with compromises that challenge an organisation’s individual objectives. Probably the most important and immediate difficulty to overcome however, is the perceptions that may be held about each partner. For example, perceptions about mining companies (as a generalisation) may be influenced by media reports, their ethical values, and any connections they have to the mining industry (such as family or friends working in a mining company). Negative perceptions may also be held about government agencies and community based nonprofit organisations. These stereotypes only serve to encourage misguided suspicion, inhibit progress and disadvantage the community as a whole. To develop much-needed trust for collaborative activities, it would be useful for each partner to identify:
• their own attitudes towards other partners
• possible perceptions of their own organisation/sector

To ensure the collaborative group’s capacity to function effectively, efforts would be needed to deliberately shift any unhelpful attitudes, and creating alignment on common partnership goals.

This would suggest that strategies to overcome barriers would include:

Definition and clarity:
• Clarify what constitutes the ‘community’
• Clearly articulate roles
• Clearly define and negotiate risks

Processes:
• Build on existing community activity, structures and networks
• Pursue participation at different levels simultaneously
• Build measures of success into monitoring and evaluation processes
• Avoid “partnership from above” – work from grassroots level and share the power, responsibility, accountability and benefits (Johnston, 2006)
Attitudes:
- Be prepared to develop and share knowledge and skills
- Be willing to share divergent views in a supportive environment
- Execute the partnership with skill and care
- Act with integrity
- Be patient and work towards long-term results

An example of an initiative that has developed from a tripartite agreement is the REACH Foundation (Regional Education and Careers in Highways), which supports regional communities by:
- distributing funds to local community groups for support services for trainees
- providing options for young people to remain in their communities (including addressing their emotional, social and educational needs)
- supporting civil construction industry by facilitating excellent training and providing employer support services
- providing job-ready trainees that are linked into social support services
- working collaboratively with local communities
- facilitating and developing corporate partnerships to address regional youth training and employment needs.

While it is acknowledged that a tripartite collaborative process is risky, this should not be seen as an excuse to avoid these activities. The benefits to be gained are clearly evident, vital to the community, and cannot be effectively addressed by any of the potential partners working independently. The timing is also right to establish this partnership, since social issues across the region have reached a point where they are impacting on all sectors of the community, including people from all socio-economic groups, established and new community members, community service providers, businesses and mining companies. This felt need actually provides the collaborative group with a common goal and incentive to act, which then reduces the risk of the partnership. The current climate of the region is also one conducive to establishing a collaborative partnership. The region is experiencing rapid change, with unprecedented economic growth, population expansion and more complex social issues. There is also future uncertainty, with potential social leakage, retail leakage, and changing demographics. A collaborative process is ideal in this climate, since it facilitates development of long-term relationships between partners and provides a vehicle for future planning. Rather than reacting to the constant changes with ad hoc activities that produce short-term results, the collaboration (including its structure, the mix of partners involved, its operational processes, and actions taken towards its chosen goals) can provide support and trust in uncertain times, and enables organisations to anticipate and resolve problems as they arise. As such, the collaborative partners are investing in both a process and outcomes that can facilitate their, and the region’s, sustainability.

So what steps can be taken to enhance social investment in community services in the near future? The collaborative process previously described suggests that social investment is not entirely related to community services procuring financial resources.
Rather, it can also mean investing in the ongoing stability of the region by participating in processes that develop skills, share expertise and take united action on regional concerns. This may be achieved by establishing a collaborative body with structural links and lines of authority to corporate sector, government, community based organisations and the community. This body’s mandate would encompass identifying strategies that support balanced social and economic growth. This would include:

- Identifying priority community issues from the combined perspectives of the collaborative partners
- Providing recommendations about strategies to address regional concerns related to social and economic growth
- Contributing to social policy that negatively impacts the region
- Where appropriate, administering resources and/or identifying key projects for the region

A simplified outline of the role of each partner, and their contributions, is provided in Figure 1 (following).
Figure 1: Conceptualisation of Regional Collaborative Group

**Community services**

*Contribute:*
- Community priorities
- Strategies to address needs
- Human resources

**Government (reps from all levels)**

*Contribute:*
- Guidelines and regulation
- Links to information
- Financial resources

**Community members**

*Contribute:*
- Community needs
- Strategy options to address needs
- Human resources

**Industry (various reps)**

*Contribute:*
- Expertise
- Links to information and expertise
- Financial resources

**Other partners**

*Contribute:*
- Expertise on specific issues as needed
- Links to further information

**Collaborative Goals**

- Facilitate implementation of priority needs
- Develop strategies to meet needs
- Contribute to long term planning
This Collaborative Group has the potential to provide the benefits identified earlier to each partner, and the community. It could also include structures and processes that address the barriers and learnings of previous collaborative activities. For example, this Collaborative Group could link with existing structures by value-adding to the Whitsunday, Hinterland and Mackay (WHAM) Plan 2015, and the Regional Planning and Advisory Committee (RPAC). The goals and strategies of both the WHAM Plan and this proposed Collaborative Group are in alignment, and have already been endorsed by industry, community groups and government. With these long-term goals articulated and ratified in the WHAM Plan, this Collaborative Group could provide a platform for their implementation, as well as feed back relevant data about strategies and processes that are workable on-the-ground, and their implications for future long-term plans. In addition, basing this Group in a community organisation could also encourage flexibility and innovation, so that timely action can be taken on strategies devised. At the same time, its facilitation by a community based organisation such as MRCSD would also anchor the Group with strong lines of accountability. This ensures that responsibility is taken to follow through on decisions, and the process has ongoing stability and support.

In summary, experiences in the Mackay region appear to demonstrate that sustainable economic development requires corresponding social development. To achieve some form of balance between these, a whole-of-community approach is needed. This requires collaborative effort and resources from across the community and economic sectors working in alignment towards a common end. These partners should have clear roles that enable them to proactively contribute their specific expertise and resources, as well as derive tangible benefits from their participation. This process enables the development of more efficient and effective community services, which in turn contributes to stronger communities with less disadvantage and enhanced liveability.

The partners must also remember that while mutual benefits may be achieved from the collaborative effort, both in terms of process and outcomes, the common goal is a stronger community. This is a space where along with economic strength, there is social cohesion, where people can make connections, have their say, and express a sense of ownership of their community. It is a place where disadvantage is not accepted, and they work to ensure minimum standards for all. It is also a place where sustainability is measured by the community’s ability to engage in their own long-term development and creation of future social and economic prosperity.
References


Qld University of Technology, Qld Council of Social Service, and Qld Govt, (2006) *Strong Communities Handbook*, Qld University of Technology, Qld.


