

Hidden Treasure: Unearthing Aspirations and Mobilising Skills in a Neighbourhood Renewal Context

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Abstract

Community strengthening approaches that emphasise local solutions to local economic, social and environmental challenges now receive significant government support. This paper examines the theoretical basis which underpins community building and place based development. It identifies a philosophy towards supporting communities that begins with a clear commitment to discover a community's assets and capacities rather than focussing on deficiencies and problems. The focus then shifts to examining how information and communication technology (ICT) can be used creatively in a community strengthening context, introducing the Neighbourhood Renewal (NR) program, which involves a whole-of-government response in partnership with 15 local communities across Victoria, Australia. In particular, the paper presents a case study of community engagement through the provision of support for NR Employment and Learning Coordinators (ELCs) in conducting local community resident skills surveys. The purpose of the surveys is to help communities to better understand themselves and the skills they possess, to gain valuable skills through the survey process, and empower residents to make better decisions about their neighbourhood's future. Specifically, information about residents' training requirements and employment aspirations will inform and direct ELCs to plan employment and training programs in their areas. The rollout of the resident skills surveys across the state of Victoria has been preceded by the pilot of similar services in the Wendouree West community. Results from the pilot are presented to explore the benefits which are being generated by combining traditional paper-based methodologies with web-based tools and services in a context where the ultimate goal is to support the economic and social health of communities.

Keywords

Information and communication technology; community strengthening, social capital, survey research, Neighbourhood Renewal

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Introduction

In Australia, state and federal government policy is increasingly focussing on the role of government–community partnerships as the means for achieving the goals of strengthening economic and social opportunities; sustaining productive natural resources and the environment; delivering better regional services and adjusting to economic, technological and government-induced change. Such policies are sustained by a belief that a partnership approach can foster the development of self-reliant communities and regions. Current approaches view the development of communities — and to an emerging extent service delivery — largely from a bottom-up, self-reliance perspective rather than from a top-down compensatory perspective.

Community strengthening programs put the onus on communities themselves to come up with solutions to their economic viability and services needs; to manage change; realise their potential; and lead their own development. Initiatives such as those occurring in the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia therefore place communities in a new position of responsibility to take the initiative for their sustainable futures (Garlick 2000, p. 10). The perceived role for government in this context is one of supporting communities in their adaptation to new challenges.

To this end, Labor state governments in Australia, particularly in Queensland and Victoria, have been ready adopters of community building initiatives as a means for addressing the dual problems of community governance and local support for reform. Examples of key programs that make up Victoria's community building initiative include:

- community building demonstration projects in 11 communities selected by government based on statistical indicators of social, economic or geographic disadvantage¹
- the Community Capacity Building Initiative where 11 pilots involved 55 communities in projects designed to strengthen the ability of people in rural towns and settlements to take charge of their future²
- Neighbourhood Renewal projects in 15 of Victoria's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods,³ where government, businesses and services providers are working in partnership with local communities to bridge economic and social gaps
- a variety of community strengthening projects, initiated with funding support from the Community Support Fund⁴.

¹ See

<http://www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au/programs/major_programs/demonstration_projects.asp> for further information.

² The Victorian Government's community building website at

<http://www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au/programs/major_programs/capacity.asp> provides further information.

³ Visit the Victorian Office of Housing website at <<http://www.neighbourhoodrenewal.vic.gov.au>> for additional information

⁴ Project information is accessible from

<http://www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au/programs/major_programs/csf.asp>.

While this change in policy approach recognises the enabling capacity for collective action, (Gray and Lawrence 2001), there is, however, a lack of research which identifies those factors which influence the likelihood that local initiatives can arrest or reverse the processes of decline or effectively achieve community plans and aspirations in terms of local development (Black et al. 2000).

This paper therefore begins with an examination of the theoretical basis which underpins such community building and place based development programs. It identifies a philosophy towards supporting communities which begins with a clear commitment to discovering a community's assets and capacities rather than focusing on deficiencies and problems. The focus then shifts to examining how information and communication technology (ICT) can be used creatively in a community strengthening context, introducing the Neighbourhood Renewal (NR) program, which involves a whole-of-government response in partnership with 15 local communities across Victoria, Australia. In particular, the paper presents a case study of community engagement through the provision of support for NR Employment and Learning Coordinators (ELCs) in conducting local community resident skills surveys.

Theorising and measuring community strengthening

Emerging literature with a focus on community building and place-based development emphasises attitudinal change, empowerment, self-reliance and cooperation — rather than competition — as particularly important in achieving change and community sustainability. Significant consideration has also been given to the concept of social capital for community building and economic development. Allen (1995), for example, has explored how communities can, through better organisation and more effective mobilisation of local resources, increase their sustainability prospects by enhancing social capital.

Social capital relates to the resources available within communities as a consequence of networks of mutual support, reciprocity, trust and obligation (see Putnam 1993, 2000, 2003 for a detailed discussion of the concept of social capital). In the Australian context, Cox (1995) raised awareness and interest in the concept of social capital through the 1995 Boyer Lecture Series, promoting socially valuable processes to encourage stronger community connections and build reservoirs of trust and mutuality. In the introduction to a discussion paper on the measurement of social capital, the Australian Bureau of Statistics (2000, p. 3) notes that the concept rapidly gained wide interest and use 'among policy makers, politicians and researchers alike' with a strong push for the general community to 'use social capital as a way to not only describe but also to understand community well-being'.

Despite its 'hot topic' status, social capital is not a precise concept. It has been the subject of much discussion and debate in government and academic circles, and in the broader popular debate. Stewart-Weeks (1998) has, for example, raised strong concerns about what he terms the 'current fascination with social capital'.

“Social capital has appeared over the horizon, like the cavalry, to rescue the policy process and give people some hope (p. 8). The scepticism, though, is driven by a sense, that for all its superficial attraction, the social capital debate is not suited to the scale and scope of the urgent, complex and often vast problems to which government generally is expected to offer solutions... People will assume that all we have to do is sprinkle some social capital glitter around and things will improve” (Stewart-Weeks 1998, p. 9).

There are also deeper social implications surrounding the concept, which were brought to light in Bourdieu's conceptualisation of social capital as:

“the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition ...which provides each of its members with...a 'credential' which entitles them to credit, in the various senses of the word” (1986, p. 249).

Bourdieu's implication is that social capital, rather than forming a panacea for the absence of economic and human capital that often characterises disadvantaged communities, may actually be the basis for maintaining social exclusion.

From a policy perspective, governments and policy makers have often been unwilling to examine the longer term and structural causes of community decline, including government policies themselves (Institute for Social Research 2001), although there have been some recent efforts at federal level to address this (Productivity Commission 2003). As the rapidity of change is generally caused by factors outside the control of individual people or communities, there have been calls for a great deal of caution in applying community-based and participatory approaches to managing change. Balatti and Falk (2000, p. 5), for example, identify that while government recognition may have increased for bottom-up community owned planning processes, the call for self-reliance, for some, is tantamount to saying 'Survive on you own or die'. While local people may have the advantage of understanding the social and environmental status of their area and of appreciating the impact of decisions made in distant locations, they often have few mechanisms to access skills, knowledge or structures that support participation in planning for the future wellbeing of their community (Sheil 1999).

What then does an understanding of social capital contribute to the process of community building? Kilpatrick and Bell (1998, p. 1) have identified that social capital facilitates learning and change in communities by 'oiling' the processes of assessing and acquiring new knowledge, skills and values. In a resource kit produced by the New South Wales Premier's Department Strengthening Communities Unit, a package of tools was produced that 'allow communities to be examined through the lens of social capital' based on principles of action research and participatory community research (Stephens 2001, p. 21). While recognising that every community is complex and unique, this toolkit identifies ten key characteristics of a sustainable community, being a community that (Stephens 2001, p. 31):

“Takes an integrated approach to creating a sustainable future.
Maximises the use of its limited time and resources in areas that will yield the greatest strategic benefits.
Develops plans that merge social and economic goals and build local capacity
Mobilises the community around priorities.
Harnesses local support and attracts the outside resources needed to achieve its goals.
Uses its critical mass of cooperating organisations to implement and evaluate locally based initiatives.
Has strong inclusive and visionary leadership.
Encourages active participation, consultation and involvement for community well-being.
Supports local investment in education, training and lifelong learning.
Has access to positive and accurate information with which to evaluate its progress in achieving its goals.”

Others have tried to develop instruments to quantify the relationship between social capital and community capacity building. Bullen and Onyx (1998) were one of the earliest to address this in Australia, identifying social capital as a bottom-up phenomenon, which originates with people forming social connections and networks. Through their work with five New South Wales communities, they developed and piloted a survey instrument for measuring social capital. Tasmanian researchers developed a complementary survey instrument for determining a community’s receptivity to capacity building (Guenther and Falk 1999; Guenther et al. 2000).

From a qualitative perspective, Onyx and Leonard (2000) have used community case studies to explore the relationship between social capital and other capital forms (financial, natural and human). They illustrated how particular communities have organised themselves in new and innovative ways and were able to demonstrate how the origins of positive examples of local development could be traced to the efforts of a small number of local individuals and/or active networks. In a more recent study Cocklin and Alston (2003) used a case study approach to examine the ‘capitals’ that underpin the sustainability of rural communities (natural, human, social, institutional and produced capital). They found that while the concept of capitals provided a systematic framework it presented a somewhat ambiguous answer to the question of what sustainability does in fact mean in the context of rural communities.

Capacities and assets verses deficiencies and problems

An important philosophy underpinning capacity-oriented approaches to development is a clear commitment to discovering a community’s capacities and assets as a prerequisite to planning and advancing local improvement efforts (Beaulieu 2002). This alternative path leads towards the development of policies and activities based on the capacities, skills and assets of people and their neighbourhoods rather than focusing on a community’s deficiencies and problems. As Beaulieu suggests:

“The best way to effectively address the challenges that face communities is to have a good knowledge of the resources available to work on local issues. So an important

beginning point involves mapping the assets of the community — the skills and talents of local residents, as well as the capabilities available or possible through local organizations and institutions. Collectively, these resources offer the wherewithal to address the host of important issues impacting the community” (Beaulieu 2002, p. 2)

This view recognises historic evidence that local people must commit to and invest effort for development interventions to succeed. It also recognises that for many communities, it is increasingly futile to wait for significant resources to arrive from outside the community. There is no choice but to lead development from within drawing on the unique combination of assets which each community boasts to build its future (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993).

“The key to neighbourhood regeneration, then, is to locate all of the available local assets, to begin connecting them with one another in ways that multiply their power and effectiveness, and to begin harnessing those local institutions that are not yet available for local development purposes” (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993, p. 8).

Building a strong community requires the effective mobilisation and marshalling of local capacities to address issues of community importance. Allen (1998) identifies four organising questions for mobilising local community assets which have been uncovered and mapped. What do we want to do (our goals)? What do we have to do it with (our map of assets)? Who or what can do it? How do we get them to do it?

Drawing on the working of Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), Beaulieu (2002) has summarised the key steps of an asset-based approach to capacity-focussed development:

1. Map the assets through an ongoing process of locating and making inventories of the gifts, talents and abilities of individuals, associations and institutions.
2. Build relationships among these assets and broaden local leadership.
3. Explore how assets can be mobilised to improve local conditions/needs (such as expanding job opportunities, improving education or achieving better health care services).
4. Engage the community in visioning and planning to achieve a shared vision and to plan the direction the community takes.
5. Leverage outside resources that help advance local improvement efforts and support priority activities.

In research conducted for Local Government Victoria, community strengthening has been identified as an exiting process “that offers a break through in harnessing the potential already available in many localities” (Considine 2004, p. 4). The Department of Victorian Communities (2003) clearly emphasise the philosophy of fostering local capacities and assets in its Corporate Plan 2003–06 with guiding principles including:

- The focus of DVC’s effort is ‘people and place’ (p. 2)
- Importance of giving communities opportunities to set directions for their future (p. 4) and of fostering and encouraging partnerships and collaboration (p. 8)

- DVC along with all Victorian Government departments will develop new frameworks to support community strengthening and link services (p. 11)
- Objectives focussed on communities that shape their future, encourage participation and embrace diversity supported by government that is easier to work with (p. 12)
- The measuring, monitoring and evaluating of programs identified as important in DVC's approach to supporting and strengthening Victorian communities (p. 20).

Involving residents in a community survey process

Local area data can enhance local decision-making and planning (Cavaye 2004); provide indicators about progress and participation into action at a local or regional level (Salvaris 2000); and assist in addressing one of the central challenges for asset-based community development by generating information which can assist in the constant building and rebuilding of relationships between and among local residents, local associations and local institutions (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993).

Community asset mapping can play an important role in promoting the type of community strengthening that is concerned with engaging local people in community enhancement efforts (Beaulieu 2002). "The idea of people taking charge of their own measurements of progress is a powerful and far reaching innovation that can bring about a new sense of civic engagement" (Sustainable Seattle 2000 cited in Salvaris 2000, p. 2). Actively involving residents in the process of identifying their community assets can generate a sense of ownership and empowerment (The Children's Partnership and Camfield Estates 2002).

In the specific context of Neighbourhood Renewal (NR) in Victoria, Salvaris (2003, p. 4) has identified that community survey processes are likely to be successful as a means for:

- involving local residents in a legitimate, respectful and open way in talking about and helping to improve problems and issues in their neighbourhood
- increasing community awareness of the NR Strategy
- developing the skills and self-esteem of a number of local residents in survey work
- generating a large amount of information important for the success of the NR project
- evaluating changes and improvements in the community generally, and as a result of the NR program
- benchmarking conditions in specific NR communities against those in the surrounding region and in other NR communities.

Community survey processes can also "yield research and statistical information which is just as reliable [a]s that which might come from a more independent or "scientific" process" (Salvaris 2003, p. 4). In the NR context, where there has been active involvement of residents as interviewers as well as respondents to surveys, the availability of resident interviewers "clearly created a climate in which interviewees were prepared to talk more openly and candidly". This is clearly one means for addressing the problem of trust between interviewer and respondent. Indeed, Salvaris (2003, p. 5) argues that the use of residents meant that the quality of

information was probably better than it might otherwise have been possible to achieve using external (and therefore unfamiliar) interviewers.

Creative use of ICT in building strong communities and social cohesion

The harnessing of new information and communication technologies (ICT) has been linked to the generation of benefits for all citizens, regardless of their geographic location. By providing support for Australians to go online, governments have hoped to “level the playing field” with benefits espoused in terms of “location independence” and for defeating the “tyranny of distance” (Information Policy Advisory Council 1997; Department for Information Technology and the Arts 1998; Brumby 1999). In its Connecting Victoria policy, the Victorian Government sum up their position as follows:

“In moving to a knowledge-based society, we — the Government, the Parliament, and the Victorian community — have a choice. We can let new technologies further divide our society into winners and losers — the information rich and the information poor. Or we can harness the potential of technology to develop the whole State and maximise opportunities for all our citizens” (Brumby 1999).

In a more recent policy statement the Federal Government outlines its key strategies for community connectivity in *Australia’s Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004-2006*. In the context of strengthening collaboration and capabilities there is a need to facilitate the creative use of ICT for building communities and social cohesion, and to facilitate the development of networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers (Department of Communications Information Technology and the Arts 2004).

Since 1999 the University of Ballarat (UoB) has, through its Centre for Electronic Commerce and Communications (CECC), partnered with diverse communities, to establish effective and sustainable online service initiatives which have actively engaged various regional development stakeholders in the design and promotion of initiatives that have:

“Dramatically improved information dissemination and community awareness of what technology can do, which in turn leads to greater take-up.

Applied information technology to industry sectors which traditionally have not been areas of IT application and which are key employers and economic drivers within the regional economy.

Promoted greater co-operation and communication between regional communities” (Simpson 1999, p. 4).

The university’s approach to delivering online services is characterised by long-term partnerships with geographical communities, regional groups, organisations, businesses and with local, state and federal governments. Despite diversity in locales, client organisations and target communities there is considerable synergy in terms of the overall initiative objectives.

These are generally associated with building community capacity and enhancing local economic and social prospects:

“Through the piloting and demonstration of services demand for similar ICT services has substantially increased. There is growing awareness of the opportunity to access tools and services which can effectively address limitations in regional Australia (such as low speed of internet access and the generally low IT skills levels). This has better ensured that organisations in the Central Highlands Region of Victoria (and beyond) can capture a share of the benefits afforded by new ICTs” (Thompson 2004, p. 25).

Underpinning community asset mapping with ICT

There are a limited number of examples where ICT has underpinned the process of engaging residents in the mapping of local assets. One key example that formed the basis for the use of ICT in community surveying in the Wendouree West Neighbourhood Renewal was a project conducted by the University of Ballarat in conjunction with Ararat Rural City.

During 2000 the University of Ballarat developed paper-based and web-based services to support the rollout of community skills surveys in six small townships through the Ararat and District Asset Based Community Development project. A web-based survey interface was developed to assist key stakeholders with the collation, analysis, dissemination, ongoing maintenance and expansion of the survey information.⁵ Similar services were subsequently developed to support neighbourhood renewal activities in the Wendouree West community (Thompson 2004).⁶ Details of this initiative are examined in the subsequent sections of this paper.

Other examples of ICT-based skill mapping are few, but include the Creating Community Connections project at Camfield Estates. In that case, residents were engaged in a asset mapping project which had four primary goals (The Children's Partnership and Camfield Estates 2002):

1. Enable Camfield Estate residents to develop skills and networks to improve self-sufficiency and community life
2. Develop a web-based, user-driven community technology system to service Camfield residents and other community technology users
3. Create a replicable model of community technology combined with community building
4. Create a framework for partnerships between communities and different sectors (academic, government and business).

A third example is the Community Living British Columbia initiative where comprehensive and accurate knowledge about community resources and key contacts has been identified as necessary to guide local development work. It has therefore been proposed that an online

⁵ See <http://www.cecc.com.au/communities/ararat/skills_audit/website>.

⁶ See <<http://www.cecc.com.au/communities/wendouree>>.

database be developed as a community resource, with the services to be used and contributed to by individuals and families in each community (Robertson 2004).

Underpinning community asset mapping with ICT has the potential to provide communities with a powerful tool for information storage and analysis. There is, however, a lack of research on the potential challenges or limitations of using ICT in a community mapping context. Key issues may emerge in areas such as the follow:

1. The introduction of ICT may increase the cost and extend the timeframe associated with community asset mapping activities.
2. The ICT systems may not be flexible enough to be customised to the reflect the specific information needs of a community.
3. The reporting capabilities may be inadequate and thus fail to support community members in effectively using the collected information as an important input in local planning and development.
4. Communities may perceive that high levels of technical expertise are required. This may discourage involvement particularly where residents or other key stakeholders have only limited technical expertise.
5. Communities may lack the skills necessary to effectively analysis and make use of the data.
6. There may be difficulties in sustaining the ICT system once donor funds and support have waned and the associated risk of the ICT system subsequently being abandoned.
7. There may be insufficient priority given to providing services to support the ongoing maintenance of the data.

In the following section the case of the Wendouree West Community Skills Survey is presented to illustrate the processes and outcomes associated with a local community skills survey.

The case of the Wendouree West Community Skills Survey

The Victorian Government's Neighbourhood Renewal program has been established in 15 of Victoria's most disadvantaged neighbourhoods, with the purpose of developing joint government and community-based approaches to address multiple causes of disadvantage. One of the key concerns has been to lift employment, training and education and expand local economies, through the development of community-based employment and education programs. This section presents background information and explores the benefits that are being generated by combining traditional survey methodologies with web-based tools and services in a context where the ultimate goal is to support the economic and social health of communities.

A significant activity during 2005 is the provision of support for NR Employment and Learning Coordinators (ELCs) in conducting resident skills surveys. This will help communities understand themselves better, gain valuable skills and empower residents to make better decisions about their neighbourhood's future. Specifically, information about residents training requirements and employment aspirations will inform and direct ELCs to plan employment and

training programs in their areas. However, prior to the state-wide rollout of resident skills surveys, the ICT-based approach was successfully through the community skills survey in Wendouree West.

The progressive rollout of the Neighbourhood Renewal Program commenced during 2001. Since that time, the University of Ballarat, through CECC and Centre for Regional Innovation and Competitiveness (CRIC), has had a significant role in the development, administration and analysis of the Community Survey and the Community Skills Survey. During 2002 CECC was engaged by the Department of Human Services (DHS) to support the Wendouree West community in conducting a local skills survey. The aim was not just to actively involve residents in the collection of information on the skills and learning aspirations of residents but also to make sure the results would be both useful and used. The specific objectives of the Wendouree West Community Skills Survey were to:

1. enhance the effectiveness of the Wendouree West Community Renewal Project
2. assist residents in accessing employment and learning opportunities
3. increase local economic and social activity.

In implementing the project the UoB undertook significant awareness raising and consultation activities to actively engage residents and members of the Renewal Team during the planning phase of the project. Once agreement had been reached on the overall project goals and approach CECC was able to commence development of the Community Skills Survey Package. This included: designing and piloting the survey instrument (for distribution via paper-based and web formats); establishing web-based administration facilities for managing resident responses; hosting the survey infrastructure; and providing ongoing advice and support.

Resident volunteers assisting in rollout of the project were provided with training in survey techniques prior to the commencement of the Community Skills Survey during November 2003. Further training was provided to members of the Renewal Team who would be responsible for the initial entry of survey responses and for the ongoing utilisation and management of the web-based facilities.

At the end of the initial survey period a total of 175 completed surveys were returned to the Wendouree West Community Renewal Office. A member of the Renewal Team entered the details of each survey into the web-based system which can be accessed at <<http://www.cecc.com.au/communities/wendouree>> (Figure 1).

The dynamic reporting capabilities of the system enabled the Renewal Team and other key stakeholders to review the characteristics of respondents, for example age, gender dispersion, time lived in Wendouree West and the level of telephone access. In the initial evaluation undertaken by CECC during January 2004, the Skills Survey Data was compared with Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) census data to evaluate factors such as participation rate (10.26 per cent of eligible working population); age profile (predominantly received from

residents aged between 45-64 years); and gender (a higher participation rate among female residents was confirmed). The full report can be accessed at:

<<http://www.cecc.com.au/communities/wendouree>> by clicking on the 'Summary Report' link.

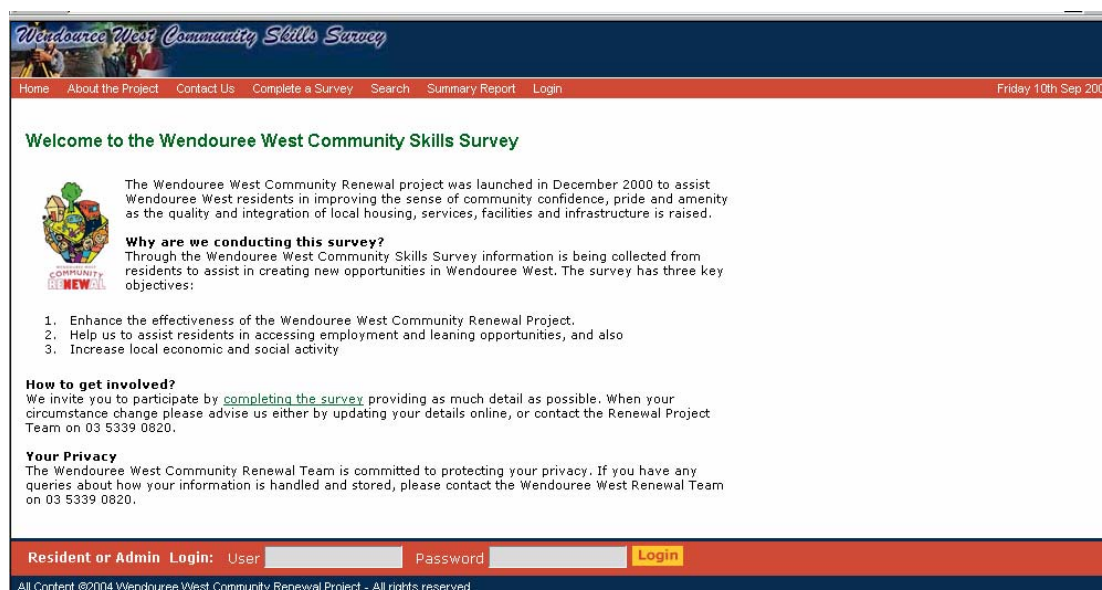


Figure 1. Wendouree West Community Skills Survey website

The skills survey information provides opportunities for making better use of existing resources and also identifies new resources that can be used to build on the strengths that already exist in Wendouree West. Comprehensive information is, for example, now available on the skills, employment and learning aspirations of individual residents with information including those skills they have, could teach or want to learn (Table 1). Residents also described the types of connections they have within the community and indicated areas where they wanted further information or to become involved (Table 2).

Table 1. Summary information skills: Trades and occupations

Trades and occupations	I have	I can teach to others	I want to learn	Formal qualification
Carpentry	17	3	11	0
Welding	22	3	10	1
Painting	52	3	9	2
Electrical	15	1	9	2
Appliance repair	16	1	11	1
Other	23	2	1	4
Plumbing	12	0	11	0
Gardening	67	6	7	0
Truck or bus driving	20	0	10	1
Office work	27	2	14	4
Retail	42	4	4	4
Mechanic	20	5	9	3
Professional	9	0	8	4
Cleaning/maintenance	70	10	3	4

Table 2. Summary information connections: Community groups

Community groups	No. of people
I am already involved	31
I would like to be involved	10
I would like more information	27
I do not wish to be involved	26

Residents also indicated whether they were willing to become more actively involved in the community (Table 3) or share their skills with others with more than 15 per cent of respondents indicating they would with comments such as: yes if I am asked; anytime, anywhere; as often as I can; willing to do paid/voluntary work; to be paid would be nice but I am prepared to volunteer some time.

Table 3. Summary information commitments: Own community

Commitment	No. of people
Meet with and get to know my neighbours and/or others in my street or community	35
Help with community clean-ups	34
Look out for/care for others in my community	32
Help with Neighbourhood Watch	32
Become a leader	18
Be happily 'led' by others	26

Through its partnership with the University of Ballarat, the Wendouree West community has secured appropriate infrastructure to support the community in recognising, valuing and leveraging its area's assets to address issues of local priority. This has more effectively supported the development and implementation of community driven strategies to boost employment, education, training, and enterprise development. Early benefits have included:

- the identification of new skills and resources which can be mobilised in areas such as volunteering and community participation
- the creation of opportunities to actively engage key stakeholder organisations such as job network providers, services groups and learning providers
- the development and implementation of strategies to extend community involvement in the Skills Survey beyond the initial levels achieved.

Skills survey information has been utilised to assist residents in accessing employment and learning opportunities and to increase participation and pride in the community. Specific examples include:

- matching residents with employment and training opportunities through the Community Jobs Program for Carers
- identifying residents with skills appropriate to the establishment of a Community Enterprise for the fencing and painting services
- identifying residents interested in volunteering to assist with the establishment of a local AusKick program
- personally inviting residents to participate in community working bees, for example during the redevelopment of Apex Park
- identifying and engaging residents through undertaking skills training to support the establishment of a local gym.

CECC is now supporting the Wendouree West community with preparations for the second round of community skills surveys. Current participants will be invited to update their details online or via a paper-based survey (with current details included). Volunteer residents will also distribute surveys to those residents who have not yet participated and encourage and support their participation. At the same time the UoB is undertaking research for the NR Branch of the Department of Human Services, which will report on the use and impact of the state-wide rollout of skills surveys across all NR areas.

Conclusion

This paper has reviewed community strengthening approaches and confirmed that the mapping of the skills and aspirations of residents represents an important beginning point for effectively mobilising and marshalling local capacities to address issues of community importance. Actively involving residents in the process fosters community engagement and participation and can generate a stronger sense of ownership and empowerment. Underpinning community asset mapping with ICT provides more effective access and utilisation of the comprehensive information generated through local skills surveys. In the case of the Wendouree West Community Skills Survey, ICT has been used as a key tool in identifying and leveraging local area assets. Effective and efficient access to information on resident skills and aspirations has been essential in initiating, monitoring and evaluating renewal activities. Community members have gained new capabilities and confidence through their active participation in the skills survey. Stronger partnerships have also developed, particularly with the local university. This is providing the community with access to expertise, tailored ICT tools and continuing support, which is enabling the Renewal Team to continue to work with residents to expand participation in the Community Skills Survey and in the broader renewal activities. ICT can support communities in more effectively achieving community plans and aspirations in terms of local development. In the case of Wendouree West the community has established an evidence base for planning the future well-being of their community. There appears to be significant potential for the application of ICT in locally appropriate ways through community strengthening

initiatives. Further research is now being undertaken to examine the impact of rollout of similar skills survey services across all Victorian NR areas. This research will assist in identifying how local differences in implementation approaches impact on the skills survey outcomes. It will also assist in assessing key success factors and examine the resources which may be required to support the longer term sustainability of community survey activities.

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