

STRENGTHENING COMMUNITIES THROUGH THE ARTS

A Cultural Development Network Discussion paper - August 2005

This paper aims to stimulate discussion among policy makers and practitioners in the arts, community development, and local government sectors to encourage a closer integration of their efforts towards strengthening communities in Victoria.

The paper will be discussed during a series of roundtable forums of artists, community development practitioners and social and cultural service managers in state and local government during August 2005. Mandy Press, former Social Planning Manager at the City of Port Phillip, will facilitate these discussions.

In partnership with the Community and Social Planners Network (CASPN) CDN is hosting a symposium: *Just Culture - Arts and Social Change* as part of the Just Communities Conference on October 25 to further develop issues and questions emerging from within the roundtables forums. Deborah Mills, author of *Art and Wellbeing* is facilitator of the symposium, designed to maximise discussion rather than formal presentations.

Ideas emerging will also inform a symposium at the National General Assembly of the Australian Local Government Association in Canberra on 9 November. The symposium, *The Benefits of Arts-Based Community Development Strategies in Building Healthy Active Communities* will be facilitated by Anne Dunn.

Discussions to inform better practice and policy

CDN is planning to develop a Charter of Practice for community cultural development work in 2006. The process outlined above will inform the Charter's development – and will continue to involve discussion among professional and community interests in Victoria.

A related objective of CDN during 2006 is to advocate for stronger and better coordinated support for community cultural development across all three levels of government. While arts programs and funding will be central to this, CDN seeks to promote effective partnerships with policy and programs beyond the arts especially those dealing with community health, community planning, and social inclusion. Local Government is a key starting point for us.

We continue to advocate an expansion of the dominant 'triple bottom line' planning model to incorporate the fourth bottom line of cultural vitality since we commissioned Jon Hawkes' influential work, *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture's Essential Role in Public Planning* in 2001. While New Zealand and Canada's national governments have embraced this kind of approach for local governance, in Australia despite growing interest and a couple of exceptions, the model has not been embraced. However, we are pleased to note the addition of the word 'culture' to triple bottom line references in planning and research documents. VCOSS Strategic Plan 2005 – 2008, "*Beyond the Triple Bottom Line: Measuring and Reporting on Sustainability*" (Auditor General Victoria) and the Victorian Community Indicators Project material are recent examples.

When overarching public policy frameworks accommodate cultural as well as social, environmental and economic bottom lines, the arts – at the heart of culture – should be valued and supported for their essential 'cultural' purpose, and their impact assessed in cultural not simply economic viability or social equity terms. Also, it should be obvious that the cultural impact of all public policy and decision-making needs to be assessed and considered. We believe this paradigm will contribute to the development of a deeper and broader commitment to the value of community-based arts, along with other community-based cultural activities.

The time is right to focus

Recent developments at local, state, national and even international levels suggest a growing interest in forging more effective links between cultural and community development here in Victoria. A fertile environment is indicated through:

1. a strong focus on civic engagement and community planning within local government, underscored by requirements of revised legislation governing Local Government.
2. the Victorian Government's recognition of local government's central role as a catalyst for community strengthening;
3. an emphasis on 'changing the way government works' within the Victorian Government towards more flexible, responsive services to communities guided by policies forged across the whole of government, rather than from within narrow departmental silos;
4. an emphasis on community engagement and participation, and the role of local government in the Victorian Government's arts policy;
5. strong leadership by Vichealth in support for community cultural development and advocacy of linkages between health, arts and local government activities;
6. the Australia Council for the Arts' scoping study on community cultural development practice (due late 2005) to inform the work of its new Community Partnerships Unit;
7. a strong coalition of arts, council and community advocates determined to protect community cultural development support by the Australia Council (notably NACA);
8. the Agenda 21 for Culture advocated by the recently formed international network, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG).

A larger view towards common purposes

The complexity of issues, viewpoints and structures entailed in a journey towards successful and sustainable integration of the arts into local community development means that we need a special kind of conversation or discourse. Without ignoring the interests, needs and pre-occupations of particular sub groups, the primary focus of discussion should extend beyond these to fix on larger, shared objectives. The lack of a common language and culture amongst diverse sectoral interests is a familiar difficulty, but must not deter us.

The terminology of 'community cultural development' continues to function more as a barrier than a doorway for many, both from within and beyond the arts. Nevertheless, our sense is that there are also many in community, arts, and government sectors with a capacity to embrace its principles, processes, and potentials, if pathways for action are more clearly identified. The black hole of semantic debates can too easily derail the articulation of a larger vision and a common purpose, and drive away the very stakeholders whose engagement is vital to sustain if policy and program reform is to be achieved.

It will take more than money

A perennial issue is, and always will be, funding. If Victoria is to become a state where community cultural development thrives, then more and better co-ordinated funding will be required. However, a narrow fixation on mere funding issues may not be the best (or quickest) way to achieve this goal, especially if it is at the expense of an analysis of broader, deeper and less tangible factors.

Public policy drives budget decisions. The challenge for community cultural development advocates is to identifying gaps in existing policies (outside the arts largely) where community cultural development approaches could be embraced. Also we need to formulate clear proposals for new policies integrating cultural perspectives and techniques focussed on benefits for communities.

THE CURRENT POLICY CONTEXT

The information in this section outlines prevailing public policy and research activities which could (or should) incorporate considerations of cultural processes and impacts into work associated with strengthening communities.

Growing Victoria Together

One of many undertakings made by the Victorian Government in “*Growing Victoria Together: A Vision for Victoria to 2010 and Beyond*” is that (as a result of programs across government):

“The extent and diversity of participation in community, cultural and recreational organisations will increase.”

The latest progress report measuring success against this indicator (one of many to which community cultural development is relevant) contains data from the Victorian Population Health Survey 2001 - 2004. While data is provided about participation in sports, church, school, professional and other groups, notable by its absence is any information about participation in cultural groups. This is disappointing as it is the only direct reference made to cultural activities in this fundamental policy of State Government.

A Fairer Victoria: the Victorian Government’s Social Policy

Despite the inclusion of several colour photographs of regional arts and community-based arts projects around Victoria, *A Fairer Victoria* does not address itself to the cultural dimension of the sources and solutions to entrenched disadvantage in Victoria. The only reference to the arts is in Section 5 under the heading: ‘Providing Fairer Access to Services’, Item 5.5 mentions Vichealth’s Audience Access Scheme, which will support six arts organisations to deliver inclusive arts programs. Mention is also made of a modest \$450,000 program (VRAP9) linking school students from regional Victoria with programs at major cultural institutions. There is no other mention of cultural programs in this important social policy.

This is disappointing as many of the best community cultural development activities in Victoria target disadvantaged communities directly, successfully building skills, confidence, connectedness and opportunities through hands-on art-making by, and about, members of the communities themselves. There are many examples of good practice: the Torch Project, Artful Dodgers Studio, Arts Access, Somebody’s Daughter Theatre Company, and Visionary Images to name just a few.

The Neighbourhood Renewal program, regarded as the best intervention in community building by the Bracks Government, supports many successful community cultural development initiatives and promotes the benefits of arts-based community development, yet the policy does not recognise this.

The Victorian government will spend \$788 million in disadvantaged communities across the State under the Fairer Victoria policy. We know that communities creating and expressing their own culture (not just accessing the arts) is a vitally important dimension of breaking down economic, social and cultural barriers – especially within disadvantaged communities. The challenge is to persuade policy makers to address this gap, and develop connections between social and cultural programs in State Government.

Creative Capacity + Victorian Arts Policy

While it is encouraging to see an emphasis on “strengthening community” in the Victorian Arts policy, a huge gap still exists in programs supporting communities’ active participation in arts – creating their own culture as distinct from ‘accessing’ the arts as audiences.

Creative Capacity + is unlike its predecessor, *Arts 21* which conceived the arts as an ‘industry’ and emphasised marketing strategies to shift the balance of public intervention from a focus on the ‘supply’ of arts ‘product’ to ‘demand’ side of the equation – ‘customer focussed marketing’. The limits of this narrow economic ‘arts industry’ model were obvious to those for whom art is not product but expression, and for those who see themselves not as customers in an arts market but as citizens in communities with rights to participate in the making of their own culture through the arts.

The recent progress report measuring achievements of Creative Capacity + contains some encouraging rhetoric in relation to Goal 1 which aims for ‘*arts for all Victorians: a culture of participation*’:

“Strategies to meet this goal encourage more Victorians from more diverse backgrounds to engage with cultural activities. All Victorians are entitled to access arts and cultural activities as a way of enjoying life, developing wellbeing and stimulating their own creative, intellectual and expressive capacities”.

“The Victorian Government is committed to fostering local identity and participation in all communities particularly in regional Victoria and outer metropolitan areas. Cultural programs play a key role in forging a sense of connection, belonging and communal wellbeing”.

Looking at the information provided to measure the Government’s progress against these laudable goals it appears that ‘participation in’, or ‘engagement with’ the arts narrows to essentially passive participation: being an audience member, attending an arts event or institution. The active participation of citizens in making meaning and making art that is the hallmark of community cultural development practice does not really feature. Yet, the overarching ‘*Growing Victoria Together*’ indicator referred to above actually does suggest a spectrum of participation:

“The extent and diversity of participation in community, cultural and recreational organisations will increase”.

While bums on seats, and clicks through turnstiles are a legitimate measures of passive participation in the arts, they cannot measure the more crucial active participation end of the spectrum where community control of ideas and cultural processes (often in collaboration with professionals) enable the kind of dynamic, active participation that can “forge a sense of connection, belonging and communal wellbeing”, and strengthen communities.

Arts Victoria administers a couple of important arts residency programs for communities and, through the Community Liaison Officers Program, supports local governments. However, much more might be achieved through forging more dynamic partnerships with other State Government department programs and local governments in support of community cultural development.

A starting point could be Arts Victoria’s establishment of a formal partnership with local government to explore more effective co-ordination of policy and funding support for arts and community strengthening through the arts at a local level. After all, Local Government in Victoria does contribute almost \$260m. per year to cultural assets and programs.

Local Government's key role in Community Strengthening & planning

A report published by the Department for Victorian Communities (DVC) in April 2005 titled *Actions for Community Strengthening with Local Government* is the latest in a series affirming the central role of Local Governments as catalysts for community strengthening. Prepared by Prof. Mark Considine of Melbourne University with Local Government Victoria, DVC, the report asserts that:

“...local government is pivotal to the success of community strengthening initiatives and to meet that challenge local government will need todevelop active partnerships and capitalise on the support of State Government, local business and the many non-government organisations active at local level.”

The report follows two related research reports commissioned by DVC:

- “*Community Strengthening and the Role of Local Government*”,
- “*Building Connections – Community Strengthening and Local Government in Victoria.*”

The Victorian Democratic Reform Act (2002) requires Local Governments to engage their community in planning for local development and place management in identifying indicators of progress towards achievement of community goals. Councils therefore are now seeking more effective ways to actively engage communities (in all their diversity). There is now greater scope for creative approaches that consider cultural issues and integrate cultural development techniques to engage citizens – (especially those usually marginalised from traditional consultation processes).

In 2002-03 Local Government in Victoria allocated \$258.8 million to arts and cultural assets and programs. There are obvious linkages between this substantial investment and Local Government's broader investment in community strengthening and community planning. A more conscious effort to encourage convergence of cultural and social programs would yield better outcomes for communities.

The Victorian Community Indicators Project

The Victorian Community Indicators (VCI) Project led by Prof. John Wiseman of VUT is assisting local governments develop and use community indicators as tools for measuring health, wellbeing and sustainability and for improving citizen engagement, community planning and policy making. Cultural as well as other ‘bottom line’ categories are included in the parameters of the project due to be completed in July 2006

“An effective indicator system should integrate social, cultural, economic, environmental and governance dimensions of wellbeing within a transparent overall framework of goals and values”.

“*Mapping Community Wellbeing: Using Community Wellbeing Indicators to Choose Goals and Measure Progress*’

Salvaris, M. and Wiseman, J. scoping report to Vichealth.

The project involves partnerships with State Government including:

- Vichealth
- Dept. of Human Services,
- Dept. of Victorian Communities
- Dept. of Sustainability & Environment

Local government peak agencies:

- Municipal Association of Victoria
- Victorian Local Governance Association

And ten partner Councils:

- City of Port Phillip
- Shire of Yarra Ranges
- Maroondah City Council
- Knox City Council
- Surf Coast Shire
- Wellington Shire Council
- Wodonga City Council
- City of Greater Bendigo
- Moreland City Council
- Hobson's Bay City Council

The project team is currently working on a draft *'Victorian Community Indicators Strategy'* and will conduct formal consultations during September and October 2005 to gather ideas and responses to it. This project has the potential to make a significant contribution to the elevation of cultural goals and indicators in local community/municipal plans.

Victorian Health Promotion Foundation - Vichealth

The Victorian Community Indicators Project is one of many examples of Vichealth's leadership in innovative research and support for community-based health and wellbeing initiatives that link with local government and recognise the power of the arts.

A four pillars approach to health promotion underpins Vichealth's excellent work and is evident in its *Strategic Directions 2003 – 2006*:

“Vichealth focuses on the social, economic, cultural and environmental factors that influence the health of Victorians.”

Its “mission is to build the capacities of organisations, communities and individuals in ways that change social, economic, cultural and physical environments to improve health for all Victorians”.

Under its Mental Health Action Plan 2005 - 2007 launched earlier this year, Vichealth has identified the arts and local government sectors as among its priority sectors for support and collaboration.

“In partnership with arts and community organisations and local government, Vichealth will support a number of schemes and projects aimed at increasing social inclusion through the medium of the arts”.

“Societies that enable all their citizens to play a full and useful role in the social, economic and cultural life of their society will be healthier than those where people face insecurity, exclusion and deprivation.” (Wilkinson and Marmot 1998).

Vichealth Mental Health and Wellbeing Action Plan 2005 – 2007,

Vichealth is probably the best supporter of community cultural development in Victoria and is well positioned to broker more effective partnerships with other government bodies to enhance and extend the place of the arts in strengthening communities.

Community Partnerships – the Australia Council for the Arts

The Australia Council's Community Cultural Development Board (CCDB), met for the last time in July 2005. The Board was dissolved by the Australia Council as part of a major restructure announced in December 2004 in which the Council sought to develop a new approach to support for community engagement in the arts (among other things).

Anxiety about the changes has run high among artists and communities committed to community cultural development from across the country, ever since this announcement. Responding to public concerns the Australia Council agreed in April 2005 to undertake a scoping study to propose new strategies and programs to achieve the Council's policy objectives in its new Community Partnerships section, including community cultural development.

The scoping study was to be concluded by the end of 2005. A reference group will oversee the study and will include two field representatives nominated by the National Arts and Culture Alliance, (NACA) an organisation set up earlier this year as a national lobby for community cultural development.

In May 2005 Australia Council CEO Jennifer Bott said:

“Our initial plans announced last December included the proposal to manage dedicated CCD grant programs through our artform boards, and this will be one of the options considered by the scoping study.

“Regardless of the study's outcomes, the Community Partnerships section will have responsibility for budget allocation and the criteria for support of Community Partnership programs, including CCD – whether they emanate from other boards or divisions of the Council”.

NACA, the Cultural Development Network (CDN), and countless local and state-based groups around the country continue to work together in advocating a strong commitment to policy development and funding for community led arts practice by the Australia Council. The Chair of CDN will meet with other NACA members in Sydney on September 4th to work towards this goal.

Continuing fears that Australia Council changes will lead to a diminution of support will not be allayed until the artists, communities and Councils watching developments have an opportunity to see the detail of the Australia Council plans.

Meantime, it seems clear that now is the time for those at local, state and national levels with a belief in the power of community-based arts to positively transform communities to focus their attention on building a sustainable support system integrating policies and programs of all levels of government (within and beyond the arts).

International local government focus on culture – Agenda 21 for Culture

The Cultural Development Network, has established links with the United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG) to support its *Agenda 21 for Culture*. Formed in 2004, and based in Barcelona, the UCLG sees itself as “the united voice and world advocate of democratic local self-government”.

In May 2004 UCLG approved Agenda 21 for Culture - a guiding document for public cultural policies of local government signatories across the world. It is being developed and promoted by a newly formed Working Group on Culture whose program 2005 – 2007 was approved at a UCLG meeting in Beijing in June 2005.

The Working Group is conceived as:

“ the meeting point for cities and local governments that place culture at the heart of their development processes”.

Its main objective is to:

“promote the role of culture as a central dimension of local policies through the dissemination and implementation of the Agenda 21 for Culture”.

The Agenda 21 for Culture is expected to be ready for publication on paper and on-line in September 2005. The Cultural Development Network will act as a link for the distribution of the document in Australia, and will advocate support for it by Councils and peak local government agencies.

FEEDBACK

Your views and ideas are important to us. Contact us to offer your perspective:

www.culturaldevelopment.net

Judy Spokes, Director, Cultural Development Network Inc.