

# One size doesn't fit all

The Illawarra Child and Community project was funded to provide child and family community development to three housing estates. The funding included a component for collaborative action research to research community development practices and to develop a model for Child and Family Community Development.

Research questions included:

- Is there a model of community development that fits the three different communities involved?
- Is there common community development practice that can be applied?
- Can the research propose a model of best practice?
- What other lessons can be learned?

The research was a partnership between three agencies and a number of community development practitioners. Workers in the three estates met monthly to reflect on their practice, and quarterly to consider the data they

## COLLEEN TURNER

had collected more formally, to answer progressively the research questions, to develop new questions, and to build a model of best practice or practices across the communities of Albion Park, Bundaleer and Shellharbour.

Two communities were established in public housing estates, Albion Park and Bundaleer. The third, in Shellharbour, is a newly established private development which includes a small percentage of social housing. The research considered the impact of a range of variables on the needs of families, including housing density, public housing, private housing, cluster housing and urban sprawl, established communities and developing communities, as well as the impact of different organisational structures on practice.

The research soon established there was a different set of issues for public

housing estates than for the private estate. For the new private estate, issues included: some initial fragmentation of community; poor social networks; high levels of household debt; and dual income families. For the public estates, issues included: high levels of stigmatisation of the community; lower levels of trust; poor experience of community participation; and a general distrust of services.

The research group tested and adapted a strengths and pressures model developed in the United Kingdom by Jack and Gill. The model proposes that families and communities have a combination of strengths to assist them to deal with life's pressures. A community might have high levels of strengths and skills and low levels of pressure, or be balancing a mixture of strengths and pressures, or it might be in the difficult situation of having low levels of strengths to deal with high levels of pressure.

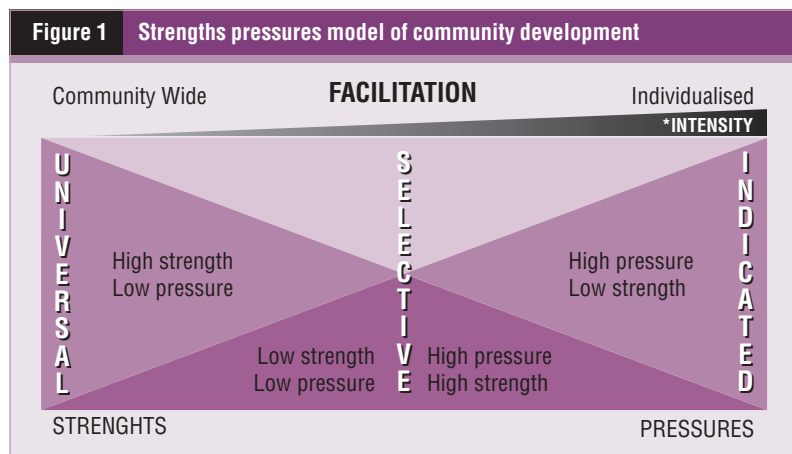
The researchers named the following situations:

*Indicated* – having high pressures and low strengths

*Selective* – balancing strengths and pressures and

*Universal* – having high strengths and low pressures

At an initial analysis they had thought communities would fit neatly into one or another of the groups however on investigation they found that communities were more complex with four





possible situations existing in each community and the relative proportions of community in each group were changeable. In general though, the private development had higher strengths and different but overall lower pressures than the housing estates.

The researchers agreed that the work of community development is to keep their community moving towards a position of higher strengths and lower pressures, the universal position. To do this the workers will employ a variety of strategies ranging from individualized to community wide facilitation. It is the proportion of intensity of the different strategies that varies according to the community's need and the progress it is making towards a position of high strengths and lowered pressures.

The research team identified five stages that happen in the course of community development work. The length of time each stage takes depends on the level of strengths already present in the community and the severity of the pressures.

*Beginning* – arriving and beginning to know the community and to be known.

*Engagement* – when the community has decided to be involved.

*Small shifts* – where participation has commenced and is beginning to make some impact.

*Building critical mass* – a culture of community participation is becoming established and people are able to

organize themselves and community events with less intensive facilitation.

*Moving with momentum* – where worker facilitation is minimal but still essential.

### Implications

As communities move through the stages their level of empowerment increases. Perhaps not surprisingly, the research has shown that, in communities that begin with relatively high strengths and lower pressures, the engagement and empowerment process is much faster. Likewise for communities that begin with lower strengths and greater pressures, more time is taken to build individual and community strengths and to use those developing strengths to overcome long-term pressures.

The implications for policy are important. The research has shown that one size does not fit all and that communities with higher needs will take

significantly longer to reach a point where they are moving with momentum. Therefore it is important to set realistic targets and timelines for community development programs particularly in “indicated” communities. The ideal would be for recurrent community development funding to allow communities to move towards a universal position of high strengths and lower pressures in a sustainable time frame and to maintain a base level of community development facilitation to maintain the community's increased strengths.

This article was adapted by adapted by **Colleen Turner** (Senior Research Officer with the Stronger Families Learning Exchange) from a conference presentation by **Vivienne Cunningham-Smith** (Senior Manager of Barnardos South Coast) and **Nick Guggisberg** (a Child and Family Community Development Worker at Albion Park Neighbourhood).

**Figure 2 Staged conceptual practice model**

Universal	Beginning-getting to know and be known	Beginning Engagement	Small Shifts	Moving Building Critical Mass	Moving with momentum*
Selective	Beginning-getting to know and be known	Beginning Engagement	Small Shifts	Moving Building Critical Mass	Moving with momentum*
Indicated	Beginning-getting to know and be known	Beginning Engagement	Small Shifts	Moving Building Critical Mass	Moving with momentum*

