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You can look at a community from two different perspectives using the analogy of the half empty glass or the half full glass. Very appropriate on Melbourne Cup Day!

Communities can be described as having deficiencies or communities and its citizens can be described as having capacities and assets. Asset based community development is a positive approach which sees the glass representing the community as being half full so that the community’s skills and talents can be utilized to make communities better places to live. Wyong Shire is located on the Central Coast of NSW just over an hour north of Sydney. The region is diverse and offers great opportunities for people to live, work and play. It is located between two major population centres of Sydney and Newcastle with excellent road and rail links. The natural resources of the beautiful beaches, lakes and waterways and rural hinterland, makes it a great place to live.

Yet what we talk about is the deficits of our community:

- The problems associated with rapid population growth and urban development.
- The Shire’s demographic profile is one of a large number of older people and families with young children – those who make the greatest demands on services,
- The high proportion of single parent families and large number of low income earners
- The significant backlog in services and facilities to meet the needs of the current population let alone provide for future growth.
- The 30,000 people who leave the Central Coast each day to commute over one hour each way to Sydney for work and the impact that has on families and the ability of those people to participate in their communities,
- The low school retention rates and low participation rates in higher education
- The high number of AVOs taken out and
- The high number of child notifications to DoCs – (Wyong CSC is the second busiest in NSW)

Pretty grim statistics that stigmatize the community.

But on the Central Coast there is now a more positive way of working with communities.

In 2002 the first Central Coast Community Congress was held. The Central Coast Community Congress is a key human services partnership project for the region involving Wyong Shire Council, Gosford City Council, Department of Community Services, Central Coast Neighbourhood Centres Forum and Central Coast Community Council.

The concept for the Congress arose out of the need for a collaborative approach to support integrated planning and service delivery and strengthen diverse local communities on the Central Coast. The Congress provides a forum that has encouraged the creation and development of joint projects and partnerships and has promoted the theory of ABCD, Asset Based Community Development.

The inaugural Congress forum “Making Headway: Challenges and Solutions for Growing Communities” was attended by over 200 delegates from a wide range of groups on the Central Coast including community organisations, local groups, government agencies, community leaders, churches and service clubs and individual community members. The

minimal cost enabled community members to take part in the event and access knowledge that would normally be out of their reach. The programme attracted speakers who were leaders in their field and provided the opportunity for them to share their knowledge. A second Congress was held this year with over 300 participants and the congress will be a biennial event.

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD) is a well developed concept and approach to community development that has been put into practise extensively in the United States. Jody Kretzmann and John McKnight at Northwestern University have developed the theoretical framework.

Asset Based Community Development (ABCD):

- Believes that meaningful and lasting community changes always originate from within, and local residents in that community are the best experts on how to activate that change.
- Focuses on the resources and capacities of a community and its residents, instead of dwelling on their needs problems and deficiencies.
- Is inherently optimistic, and assumes every single person has capacities, abilities and gifts. Living a good life depends on whether those capacities can be used, abilities expressed and gifts given.
- The strength of a community is directly proportional to the level that residents want, and are able to contribute their abilities and assets to the wellbeing of their community.

It is not rocket science. The concepts of building on what we have got, focusing on the positives and strengths are very simple and practical yet traditionally had not been the focus of our work.

An Ongoing Framework to nurture projects

The Congress has provided an important foundation for implementing change and facilitating improved social outcomes for the Central Coast. There has been a significant shift in thinking and approaches by the sector from a needs or deficit based planning approach to an asset based community development or strengths approach. This shift is also evident in the wider community with groups finding new energy and focus in identifying local assets and mobilising these to initiate local projects. The Congress has provided a positive learning environment and created a positive mindset to put ideas into practice and “talk up the community”.

Specific projects that are underway and that have encouraged people to get involved in their local community and build connections include:

Development of an Asset Based Community Development Tool Kit

An Asset Based Community Development Tool Kit *“Building Your Community- How To Get Started”* has been prepared in response to the overwhelming success of the inaugural Congress held in February 2002.

The aim of this Tool Kit is to assist communities to undertake community activities that enhance cohesion and pride within the community by building on the community’s strengths. The Tool Kit provides a practical guide of how to do it. Local communities are putting these ideas into practice.

The Entrance ABCD Project – Putting Ideas Into Action

Community members met via the Entrance Neighbourhood Centre to develop a local asset map and a range of local projects have developed. These projects focus around transport and bringing people together in the community. The “Transport Project” is looking at improving transport for local residents by compiling a database and information booth. The “Bringing People Together” Project is aimed at linking local groups, businesses and residents together to share information and resources available in the local area. These projects are an excellent example of how workers have changed their approach to community development following on from the Congress and recognises the key potential role that neighbourhood centres/community centres can play in facilitating and brokering community building activities and connecting people.

San Remo Beautification Project

San Remo residents via the San Remo Neighbourhood Centre have grouped together to undertake a beautification project to foster a stronger sense of community in their area and tackle abuse of drugs and alcohol. Community working parties have been formed to tackle three focus areas: the entrances to San Remo; streetscapes; and parklands and reserves. Safety and the perception of safety will dominate the final result. The project has attracted funding and support from the Northern Wyong Community Drug Action Team.

Building Bateau Bay

The project involves a number of local community initiatives aimed at enhancing community self-confidence, by recognising and harnessing local skills, and diminishing the stigma often associated with residing in large Department of Housing Estates. It is a collaborative project involving Council, the Department of Housing, community organisations and community members working together and sharing resources. Community building activities currently underway include working with community members eg. young people, children and parents to identify assets of their area and facilitate local project working parties.

The working parties have developed a local newsletter; established a neighbourhood advisory group; improved facilities for young people in the area including sporting facilities, skate ramp etc, park improvements; and organising activities such as community BBQs and community breakfasts to provide opportunities for community members to link together and to share information about their neighbourhood and to obtain information of community services available in the area. The Department of Sport and Recreation has organised a Sport in the Streets project that attracts over 50 kids each Monday afternoon to play a wide range of sports free.

The asset based community development model used in these communities is highly adaptable and will be applied to other local communities within the Shire.

Warnervale Wadalba Release Area

Warnervale/ Wadalba Release area will house an additional 50,000 people over the next twenty five years. The Community Support and Human Services Strategy For Warnervale/Wadalba takes advantage of the unique opportunity this release area provides, for an integrated approach through State Government, local government, non government organisations and the community working more collaboratively in the planning and provision of human services.

This Strategy takes advantage of recent State Government policies regarding ‘whole of government’ approaches to service provision and of developments in social capital theory over the past decade. The strategies are collaborative, multi-sectoral approaches to building a community and efficient, co-ordinated service delivery that require ongoing commitment and participation by a wide range of State Government agencies, non-government agencies and Wyong Shire Council and driven by the community. In taking this broad approach, it is

expected that the social outcomes for the residents of this new development will be substantially better off than in a traditional urban development of the past.

The release area is being developed with a triple bottom line approach and is striving to be socially, economically and environmentally sustainable.

Regional Recognition and Identity

The Congress is an excellent example of a project that has raised the profile of the Central Coast and assisted to establish regional recognition of what can be achieved by government agencies, non-government organisations and the community working together and sharing resources.

At the heart of the Congress is the idea that communities have the capacity to initiate activities that build strengths from the inside out rather than relying solely on external resources and support. This pro-active and community-driven approach has the potential to result in increased funding for social projects on the Central Coast.

The Congress has provided a good opportunity to showcase regional collaboration and local community building initiatives that encourage social and economic participation, with visible results generating optimism, a sense of pride and local and regional identity.

Outcomes have included:

- The enhancement of community spirit and pride
- Increased confidence amongst residents
- A change in how people view their community – limitless possibilities not problems, talking up of the community and not talking down or stigmatising the area
- Fundamentally community building is about relationships between people

“All historic evidence indicates that significant community development only takes place when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in effort. That’s why you can’t develop communities from the top down or from the outside in.” (McKnight & Kretzmann, 1993)

Video from 2004 Central Coast Community Congress - ‘Real People Doing Real Things’.