



Ordinary Officials—Building Community Capacity Through Cross-Sectoral Collaboration

Centrelink—A Case Study

The research indicates that opportunities for collaborative work including the sharing of government's considerable 'capital' should be given more attention by those developing social policy. Dr Gail Winkworth



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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the benefits of government service delivery agencies working collaboratively across sectors to address employment barriers for people on long term income support. It explores the recent interest in local approaches to the building of social capital and the case made for the inclusion of government as a player in this process. Through an analysis of interviews with twenty frontline managers at Centrelink, the paper argues the benefits of sharing physical, human and social capital across networks for citizens, communities, organisations and government. The research indicates that opportunities for collaborative work including the sharing of government's considerable 'capital' should be given more attention by those developing social policy.

INTRODUCTION

The disconnection of government from local communities has been a consistent theme in the Australian social policy literature. New Public Management approaches and purchaser provider models of human service provision over the past 15-20 years have tended to favour 'top down' centralised, non participatory approaches to local service delivery which are further enhanced by automation and standardised systems. Nevertheless a key recommendation of the *Report of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform* in 2000 was the creation of 'Social Partnerships' to build 'community capability' and 'increase opportunities for social and economic participation' (RGWR, 2000:6). These 'partnerships' it was envisaged, would include government working alongside the non-government and business sectors to develop individualised solutions at the local level, particularly for people on long term income support. The recommendation of the Reference Group, however, met with scepticism from some providers of welfare services and other commentators who speculated whether, after years of 'command and control', governments are actually capable of forming collaborative relationships with anyone. Moreover, they questioned whether it is appropriate for government to do so and whether this new direction might signal a withdrawal of government responsibility for the delivery of services (Mendes, 2003).

Six years later studies of cross-sectoral partnerships involving government are lacking in Australia and existing accounts produced by government tend to

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lack a critical approach. In particular the literature has paid little attention to the role of 'ordinary officials' (Considine & Lewis, 1999:468) and how they may adapt their roles to address the significant structural issues confronting people on long term income support.

This paper examines what collaboration means in practice for a government service delivery agency. Through an analysis of in-depth interviews with twenty frontline Centrelink managers, the paper argues the potential for government service delivery agencies to share their considerable physical, human and social capital with other sectors and the perceived benefits of working across sectors to improve opportunities for disadvantaged people. It also makes the claim that cross-sectoral partnerships involving government have tangible benefits for the organisation itself and for the government.

THE BACKGROUND TO CROSS-SECTORAL COLLABORATION

It has been argued that community development, such a powerful discourse during the 1970s, reclaimed its legitimacy under the new banner of community capacity building at the end of the 20th century. Goodwin identifies a number of reasons for its demise during the 1980s and 1990s: community development did not fit with the principles of economic efficiency; the processes involved in community development were not quantifiable economic transactions; the performance management culture of the time focused on outputs rather than processes; communication between the community and government became organised around 'predetermined objectives and expert diagnoses of social needs' with government as both determiner and expert diagnostician. The contemporary emphasis on 'capability' reflects what Goodwin describes as a clawing back of the discourse of community by the more recent counter discourse of social capital, which, she says, makes a compelling case that community development is economically rational, may reduce the welfare budget and is a 'good investment' (Goodwin:2002).

SOCIAL CAPITAL AND COMMUNITY CAPABILITY BUILDING

In 1995 Eva Cox's Boyer lectures brought to prominence in the Australian scene the notion of four forms of capital: financial; physical; human; and social (Bullen & Onyx, 2000: 4). While the first two forms of capital—financial and physical—are well understood, it is 'human capital' (defined by Cox in her lecture as the 'skills and resourcefulness of individual human

beings') and 'social capital' ('the store of trust, goodwill and cooperation between people in the workplace, voluntary organisations, the neighbourhood, and all levels of government') (Cox, 1995) that are of particular interest to this paper, particularly as they apply to the contribution of government in local communities.

In recent years there has been increasing attention given to understanding the community benefits of social capital, such as enhanced health, better educational outcomes, improved child welfare, lower crime, reduced tax evasion and improved government responsiveness and efficiency (Productivity Commission, 2003:ix). The OECD for example, has concluded that although aspects of social capital can be sometimes detrimental, social capital is likely to have a range of social and economic benefits (OECD, 2001, in Productivity Commission: 2003: 1). The World Bank (2002) reports increasing evidence that social capital is critical for poverty alleviation and sustainable human and economic development (in Productivity Commission, 2003:1). According to Cox, social capital 'should be the pre-eminent and most valued form of any capital as it provides the basis on which we build a truly civil society' (Cox: 1995:2).

Communitarian approaches to the building of social capital emphasise the role of local civic institutions but remain ambivalent about the role of governments and business (Putnam, 1995). Their focus rests with local groups such as 'non-profit organisations, Parents and Citizens groups, neighbourhood centres, playgroups and others that have an egalitarian structure' (Cox, 1995: 19 and Onyx and Bullen, 1998 in Healy et al, 2004). Further, they adopt a localised concept of social capital to argue that local ties, particularly close family ties, are the central drivers of social capital creation, and that the support of non-local institutions is irrelevant and may actually be harmful to the formation of social capital (see Fukuyama, 2001 in Healy et al, 2004).

Challenging the communitarians, other researchers claim that localised approaches on their own are insufficient to address the structural origins of the problems facing communities (Cattell, 2001, p. 1513 and Spies-Butcher, 2002, p. 187 in Healy, et al, 2004). Putnam's work, for example, is criticised because it excludes the role of government and places too much weight upon participation in voluntary associations, assuming that reciprocity and trust will naturally flow from this (Harriss & de Renzio, 1997 cited in Winter, 2000). Putnam is also criticised for excluding the role of government in the creation of social capital, including the development of reciprocity and trust (Putzel, 1997 cited in Winter, 2000). There is, according to Healy et al, empirical evidence to show that 'the presence of public infrastructure and community services is a necessary condition for developing supportive

community networks, particularly for citizens with high support needs' (Healy et al, 2004: 333).

Further, Stone (2001:11 in Healy et al, 2004) cautions that: 'Left to its own devices, social capital may act to exacerbate rather than mediate existing inequalities' and suggests that there is a clear ongoing and critical role for government involvement in the provision of welfare. Healy et al conclude that:

A key tension for policy makers is that of recognising and valuing local networks without thereby relieving governments and other agencies of their responsibilities to local communities (2004:333).

THE EMERGENCE OF NETWORK GOVERNANCE

In the years following 'Welfare Reform' in Australia there appear to be an increasing array of new policy initiatives involving government service delivery agencies, particularly at the local and state levels, that are based on cross-sectoral partnerships between the public, the private and the civil sectors.¹ These new initiatives focus on what Reddel calls 'management by negotiation and horizontal networks, policy learning and organic organisational forms rather than traditional methods of hierarchical command and control or market models' (2004:137). The value of these 'networks', it is argued, is that they are more likely to address the 'joined up, connected' nature of problems experienced by disadvantaged communities. Such partnerships, with their 'bottom-up' creativity and insights, are claimed to be able to create pathways from exclusion to social and economic well-being and at the same time still preserve the 'best values of the welfare state' (Waite: 2002). The literature certainly claims that collaborative cross-sectoral approaches offer greater discretion and flexibility for those at the service delivery end of public policy (Waite: 2002; Reddel, 2002; Hounslow, 2002).

It is the practical reality of how government service delivery agencies develop 'collaborative cross-sectoral arrangements' and, in particular, how they can share their considerable physical, human, social and, indeed, technical resources which is not well researched and which this paper seeks to explore.

CENTRELINK—A CASE STUDY

In 2003-2004 a project was undertaken within Centrelink to explore the nature of partnership activities between local Customer Service Centres (CSCs) and other agencies in local communities. The project grew out of the Australian Government policy imperative to increase participation levels and reduce numbers of working age people on income support. As an organisation with a history of services driven by payment categories, the

Centrelink executive became interested in exploring how the government service delivery agency could move outside the existing policy and service paradigm to improve outcomes for 'customers' who faced significant barriers to participation.

THE IMPETUS FOR THE RESEARCH

The outcome of 'Welfare Reform' saw Centrelink's role in assisting working aged people on long term income support to 'participate' (preferably in paid employment) largely confined to four main functions: firstly, assessment for income support and job readiness; secondly, the development of 'Participation Plans' by customer service officers; thirdly, referral mainly to a set of highly prescribed Commonwealth funded vocational, employment (Job Network) and personal support programs; and, finally, monitoring of a highly specified set of customer obligations and requirements including breaching and other penalties. Three years after 'Welfare Reform' and the Australians Working Together Legislation which was designed to increase the 'participation levels' of people on income support, there was little discernable difference in the numbers of long term unemployed in Australia; indeed the increasing upward trend of people on the Disability Support Pension caused concern to people in traditional welfare circles and outright alarm to Government fiscal boffins (Henry, 2003).

With an increasing imperative to stop the churning back to Centrelink of 'customers' referred to the Job Network and other Commonwealth providers of services, Centrelink undertook research to better understand what local communities could offer their 'customers'. With evidence that the collaborative efforts of some managers 'on the ground' were resulting in positive outcomes for people with substantial barriers to employment, interest developed in how the organisation could leverage its considerable capacity to broker more individualised service options through a much broader range of agencies and community groups (not just Commonwealth funded programs) (Interview with CEO, 2003). A research project was conducted to examine the nature of partnership activity in local areas. Part of this research involved asking managers about the benefits of cross-sectoral partnerships in local communities.

THE PROJECT

The project involved in-depth interviews with managers who had established a reputation for successfully working with local communities. Participants were asked a number of questions about partnership activities with other government agencies, the non-government sector, potential employers, business, schools and other community groups such as clubs, sporting bodies,

and local charities. Of specific relevance to this paper were questions about why managers chose to work collaboratively with local groups despite the lack of specific funding to do so from Commonwealth 'purchasing' policy Departments.

THE SAMPLE

Using a purposive sampling frame, twenty managers were selected on the basis of their reputation in developing cross-sectoral partnerships. Of the sixteen managers who were currently working in customer service centres:

1. Three worked in inner city offices which were characterised by: transient customers, many of whom were homeless and suffered a combination of drug/alcohol and mental illness problems; high numbers of culturally diverse people including refugee groups; a casualised work force; a high number of unemployed and people with disabilities. The main payment groups tended to be Newstart allowance (unemployment benefits) and the disability pension. In these areas the number of people on disability pensions tended to exceed the number on Newstart Allowance.
2. Three worked in metropolitan areas which were characterised by: high numbers of retirees, students, young people not studying or employed; hidden pockets of poverty and family violence. In one area there was a high number of single middle-aged men in boarding houses.
3. Nine worked in urban fringe areas which were characterised by: large industrial belts; new housing estates and public housing; prisons; high culturally diverse populations; relatively high numbers of Indigenous people; high numbers of parents raising children on their own; and young people who had not reached Year 12 and were not linked into studies or training or employment. The main payment types tended to be 'Newstart Allowance', Disability Pensions, 'Parenting Payment Single' and 'Family Payments'.
4. One worked in a rural and regional site which was characterised by: dispersed populations with few transport connections; high customer populations in all program types; considerable seasonal demands on the office services (drought, industry restructure and itinerant seasonal employment major impacts); a large Indigenous population and a significant Middle Eastern multicultural population (especially Iraqis).

WHY PARTNERSHIPS?

I will now examine more closely why, in their opinion, these managers have systematically invested personal

and organisational resources in the development of local cross-sectoral relationships.

All the participants strongly argued for approaches to the long term unemployed that recognised the interplay between the 'customer's' personal circumstances and the realities of their local environments. Further, they argued the importance of brokering cross-sectoral solutions to address these unique circumstances. The benefits of cross-sectoral collaborative partnerships, identified by the twenty participating managers² can be broadly categorised as: (1) benefits to citizens (referred to as 'customers' within the organisation); (2) benefits to local communities; (3) benefits to the organisation (Centrelink); and (4) benefits to government.

BENEFITS TO CITIZENS ('CUSTOMERS')

Although the Australian Government has a strong policy preference for 'economic participation', which is generally understood to mean paid employment, managers defined a wide range of participation activities which they believed were critical in assisting people along a pathway to work. The majority of managers articulated the importance of working with others to 'build the bridges' necessary for personal and skill development, training and volunteering options for people who have either social and/or personal barriers to employment, or, for whom paid employment opportunities are not available in their local communities. Fourteen frontline managers specifically referred to the 'transition' or 'bridging' role that is made possible for customers with barriers to participation through partnerships with other service providers. Examples of this kind of discourse include:

'If you have people who have barriers that don't fit into one of the already built structures like Job Network...you have to build the structures that enable people to start on the continuum' (participant number 8).

'For people who don't have recent workforce experience this is a stepping-stone to engaging more fully with the Job Network' (15).

Participants also expressed support for service delivery models which encouraged them to engage with other critical service providers such as state government human and corrective services agencies. To work in isolation from these agencies means missing critical information about the other systems that have an impact on their 'customers'.

The following are examples of these everyday working relationships between 'ordinary officials' in Centrelink offices and people within other human services

organisations who work with the same group of people, to increase accessibility of services:

- co-locating services (eg: tenancy support officers, youth workers, family support agencies visiting Centrelink offices on regular days);
- outsourcing within state government and community organisations such as local schools, juvenile justice centres, boarding houses, alcohol and drug services;
- encouraging local cultural associations to use Centrelink facilities as meeting places in areas where a high number of customers are born overseas;
- bringing together relevant service agencies, including Centrelink, into a central and single location to offer a broad range of assistance;
- conducting joint information seminars with other state and local government and non-government agencies and distributing service information for all agencies; and
- making special arrangements for particularly vulnerable groups, for example, Centrelink Community Unit in Adelaide CSC works closely with the Migrant Resource Centre to ensure immediate organisation of income support, temporary housing and cultural support to streamline contact for homeless migrants upon arrival in Australia.

BENEFITS TO LOCAL COMMUNITIES

While acknowledging that notions of 'community' are strongly contested, participants nevertheless articulated a view of the benefits of a partnership approach for 'local communities'. A few local managers commented on the way in which working across sectors contributed to the overall ability of community groups at the local level to sort things out for themselves by combining the total share of resources available to address problems.

Obviously resources are an issue and I think that every government will recognise that there cannot always be an entire reliance on resources provided by government to do certain things in the community. It is important to work with others to build social capital (participant 1).

Healy et al have challenged the neo-classical view that government and business institutions play very little role (and indeed may be harmful) in the creation of social capital. In line with this the managers interviewed argued that government officials who are service deliverers do have a particular role in developing trust and confidence.

We could get involved there and see who else we needed to try and get community pride in doing something, because that's really what it is ... helping people to be proud of their community and feeling they are putting something back into it and not just being isolated... (13).

A critical component of building trust in government service deliverers as the agents of government, according to some managers is the ability to help 'close the policy loop'. Managers saw potential in the relationship that they could play as the intermediary between community groups in local communities and the policy arms of government. For example,

My role would more be along the lines of providing policy information and putting that information in a context that the community groups can relate to so they can actually see the benefit...you know, we now have a pretty good understanding of the local scene here, where they're coming from, what their concerns are, what their fears are. And I think that puts us in a very good position. A relationship of trust is always the first step in building any partnership (1)

and

...or they will come and say, 'Okay, well, this is really not working' in which case I would then provide feedback [up the line].... We're part of the feedback loop... (1).

Several managers mentioned other practical benefits of a partnership approach for the 'community' including increased community responsiveness in disasters or emergency situations. For example,

Another great thing is the ability to react quickly say to fires or other disasters—because of the partnerships you have already made—we are all on the local recovery committees (2).

BENEFITS TO THE ORGANISATION

Participants were more articulate about benefits for their own organisation than they were about benefits for any other stakeholder group. There were three main responses in this category: the first was the reduction in customer aggression (n=15), especially the importance of good 'work flows' between agencies and other modes of service delivery such as 'outsourcing'³ and other active outreach work; the second was the job satisfaction and personal enjoyment that managers and staff derive from working with external agencies who are involved with the same customer/client group (n=10). For example,

'I get a great deal of enjoyment out of seeing the difference [this way of working] makes to people's lives...I'm learning an awful lot. Learning all the time' (8).

and

'But I actually find that I quite enjoy the process of establishing and linking because - well I think actually what it does is enhance the organisation you work for which makes you feel good because your organisation

is seen as a good organisation. You can actually see it in the staff, like you still have people who are unhappy about where they work. ...however I think it is actually changing, people smile more when they come to work' (3).

Finally, a number of managers (n=4) commented on how working across sectors improved their responsiveness to key performance measures (KPIs) and generally helped them identify issues for their customers early so they could put processes in place to address these more effectively. The ability to move quickly to identify issues and to respond through early intervention was also regarded as significant for Centrelink's future contestability in the 'market place'.

'I like to get ahead of the game ...and I see this as a real step to ...ultimately reducing our workload for the staff' (5).

'And not only is it fundamental that we should do it, but it's part of really whether or not you want government, and I do, to have a significant intervention role in this—you know—in this part of the economy' (12).

'It helps manage the KPIs. Even simple things like sending people out of the office [outsourcing]...if the community knows how you operate then it can influence them to help your customers do the right thing' (11).

BENEFITS TO GOVERNMENT

In the main these responses were about the contribution that cross-sectoral partnerships make to the government policy agendas of: connected government; increased levels of participation; reduced reliance of customers on income support; stronger families and communities; and early intervention. One explained this in the following way:

But if you're seriously looking, in terms of the policy outcomes of stronger families or if you're looking at policy outcomes of moving people forward, reducing welfare dependency, any of those kind of big ticket itemsyou become aware that Centrelink is only one part of the puzzle (18).

Participants also considered that working across program and sector boundaries helped prevent unintended negative consequences of other interventions. In this they were not only referring to the obvious poor consequences of relevance to Commonwealth programs such as breaching, but, in recognition that 'customers' of the Commonwealth were also 'clients' of the States, they referred also to the benefits of a cross-sectoral approach to:

interventions by the justice system or interventions by the education system (18).

Reflecting an ability to integrate both Commonwealth and State policy outcomes, they saw the ultimate goal of government policy as building personal and community capability. Cross-sectoral approaches were, in the opinion of these managers, the only way to achieve this.

...if we're genuine about that and if we're not just, you know, bean counting... to make that kind of difference, you can only do it in conjunction with a range of other players in the field (1).

Table 1 (next page) sets out a fuller description of the benefits of cross-sectoral partnerships to 'customers', communities, the organisation and the government.

The following excerpts from case studies demonstrate how some of these 'benefits' translate in practice.

The first example demonstrates how Centrelink identified young people who applied for income support so that staff could engage these young people in a collaborative initiative with schools and mentors in the local area. In this example the sectors involved are Centrelink (Commonwealth Government service delivery), schools (public institutions) and mentors (from not-for-profit agencies). The partnership will not necessarily provide active participation opportunities for the young people involved but its purpose was rather to increase their self esteem and help them become sufficiently stabilised for future vocational training. The manager describes the partnership in the following way:

These kids haven't even finished Year 10, so their literacy and numeracy is probably pretty poor. They we're just going from friend to friend. And the transition brokers who work in the local secondary schools, also knew that there were kids that were just falling by the way.... Together we identified ones who were on our payments, who had been unemployed for a period of 10 to 12 months and we interviewed them all to see if they wanted to be involved, and what else we could do to help support them. And out of that has come the Linking Young People to Employment and Training, which is called LYPET. It targets particular young people and gets them linked with a mentor. I guess we are saying, 'Okay, they're not job ready yet. In many cases they're not ready to participate in anything at all'... I've got a project person working on it and we're sending them all letters to link them with a mentor. It doesn't have to be paid employment at first. It can just be something like voluntary work to get their confidence up and to give them skills as well (4).

The second example illustrates how staff worked outside existing prescribed funding arrangements to access other services. Rather than cause people at critical times in their 'recovery' to join the waiting lists of existing Commonwealth funded programs, the professionals in this office brokered other individually tailored services through a local (state funded) hospital, at no additional cost. The only cost, in fact, was to their own key performance indicators which, in their assessment, did not offer a way for innovative cross-sectoral initiatives to be counted.

'The Centrelink Disability Officer has brokered a pain management clinic for her customers because there are insufficient pain management providers in the community. Customers can't compete at the job end of the spectrum because they have residual issues around pain, self esteem, other issues. The regular [Commonwealth] providers around are booked out for six months if they take it on at all. There are two options here. We'll do it easily and we'll give them a disability support pension or we'll try to help stabilise them by going more widely than the Commonwealth providers and finding who does pain management courses, you know for arthritic pain and those sorts of things. What she found was a pain management clinic at a local teaching hospital that had a short waiting period. She said we have a bunch of people with pain management issues and they said they'd take them on for free. That means we can move onto the next steps, which might be literacy and numeracy' (8).

'If our choice was to stay focused on our Commonwealth purchased program—[a choice that would have resulted in KPIs being met] the customer would have had to wait six months. Or we can be customer-focused and find a place in the community now' (8).

CONCLUSION

This paper examines claims in the literature that the emergence of new partnership initiatives at the local level offers greater flexibility for building community capacity. The practical reality of these partnerships, what they offer the parties involved, and the particular contribution of government service deliverers is explored through a study of 20 Centrelink managers at the frontlines of the organisation.

The study found that managers at the front lines of a government service delivery organisation systematically invested substantial personal and organisational resources in cross-sectoral partnerships, which clearly went beyond the prescribed, purchased units of work they were funded to deliver. The benefits of collaborative partnerships fall into four categories: benefits to their 'customer' in building the bridges necessary for a greater range of participation opportunities; benefits to local communities, especially the trust generated in the agents of government and the implications this has for building social capital; benefits to the organisation itself, especially in some improved key performance indicators,

Table 1: Benefits of cross-sectoral collaboration

<p>Benefits for citizens ('customers')</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Circumstances better understood Better targeted referrals Services easier to access Needs addressed through new collaborative arrangements Reduced debt Reduced breaching New opportunities for participation 	<p>CROSS-SECTORAL COLLABORATION</p>	<p>Benefits for local community</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Early responses to emerging problems Addresses service gaps Creates participation opportunities Fundraising/volunteer pool increased Reduced debt level Increased wealth Improved responsiveness in emergencies Bridges cultural gaps
<p>Benefits for the organisation.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increases understanding of customers job readiness Better targeting of resources Customer aggression reduced Reduced complaints Improved staff morale Improved key performance indicators Increased staff knowledge and skills 		<p>Benefits for Government</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Increased civic confidence Resources more targeted to need Reduces negative unintended consequences of policy Delivers policy outcome Integrates government policy across sectors/jurisdictions

increased morale and better work flows with critical agencies; and finally, benefits to government through the increased ability to integrate policy outcomes such as 'stronger families and communities' with 'participation'. Partnerships across sectors, they asserted, helped reduce negative unintended consequences of policies such as breaching, and substantially increased local interagency resourcefulness in emergencies and disasters.

The findings from this research indicate that opportunities for collaborative work and the sharing of 'physical, social and human capital should be given more attention by those developing government policy, especially the importance of brokering opportunities through collaborative practice across all sectors.

ENDNOTES

- 1 (http://www.communitybuilders.nsw.gov.au/getting_started/; <http://www.communitybuilding.vic.gov.au/>).
- 2 Four additional managers who were no longer working at the front lines were also interviewed.
- 3 A Centrelink term to describe services delivered at a venue other than the Centrelink Customer Service Centre or Call Centre, such as a university, a homeless shelter, a youth 'one stop shop'.

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