

# **TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES: TOWARDS A RESEARCH AGENDA**

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## **Abstract**

The term 'community' has re-entered policy debates in recent times in connection with new views on economic management and increasing concern about spatial disparities in Australian society. In this paper we review current research and on communities and policy interventions into community transformation as a way of outlining a possible research agenda.

## **Key words**

Community, transformation, policy, development

## TRANSFORMING COMMUNITIES

Community has become a cult, an object of warm-and-fuzzy ritual worship for politicians of all stripes, academics and the rapidly expanding new class of social commentators. Nobody can get enough of the C-word: it's supposed to be a panacea for reducing crime, stopping youth suicide, getting the unemployed back to work, and improving your health. To borrow a line from the well known social theorists Roy Slaven and H.G. Nelson, we live in a society where too much community can never be enough. (Morton, 2000:1)

Tom Morton's lead article in a recent edition of *Spectrum*, the thinking person's section of the Saturday Sydney Morning Herald, is a critical expose of the increasing power of the term 'community' in Australian public policy debate. For Morton, the unthinking embrace of this term across the political spectrum is a worrying phenomenon. The "C-word" he writes, "is the camouflage behind which government has conducted a massive withdrawal from society" in terms of its economic responsibilities (p.11), while at the same time promoting conservative, moralistic "community values" that endorse greater public involvement in citizens' private lives (p.10).

Morton puts his finger on one of the interesting, or perhaps, suspicious aspects of the term 'community'—the way in which it seems destined to be able to do good work across the political and social spectrum. It would appear that no matter in what context it is used—whether with reference to the global financial community, the gay community or the gambling community—it has some purchase. Feminist political theorist Iris Marian Young sheds some light on the 'ideal of community' when she writes that it

presumes [that] subjects can understand one another as they understand themselves....it privileges unity over difference, immediacy over mediation, sympathy over recognition of the limits of one's understanding of others from their point of view...(1990: 302, 300)

As it's become known in western thought, the term community, Young argues, expresses the desire to overcome individualism and difference, to produce social wholeness and mutual identification (Young, 1990: 302). But it is just this fuzzy warmth that critics like Morton find so chilling.

Georges van den Abeele, discussing the work of Jean-Luc Nancy, helps to locate where this uneasiness might spring from when he traces the "ecumenical appeal of community" to the two slightly different etymologies of the

word—on one hand *com + unus* meaning “what is together as one”, and on the other hand *com + munis* meaning “with the sense of being bound, obligated, or indebted together”(1991:xi). “As if by coincidence” he writes, “the rival etymologies point to the two classic ways the West has tried to theorize community between the organicist notion of the “body politic” [a community that is absorption into oneness], and the idea of social contract [a community that is mutual indebtedness]” (1991:xi). These differing interpretations of community have fed into divergent political philosophies and practices.

One side is authoritarianism and totalitarianism where the social and political body is ruled by the head (the state or dictator) which stands in for the multitude making up the whole, and in so doing speaks for and as the whole, eliminating difference through exclusion, deportation or extermination. The emergence in Australian policy debate of ‘conservative community values’ has faint overtones of this tendency (Morton, 2000:10). On the other are the ‘freely’ aggregated self-determining subjects of possessive individualism whose differences in terms of access and ownership are erased as they enter the political or economic market place of contracts, deals and debts. The emergence of a language of ‘mutual obligation’ and ‘rights and responsibilities’ in Australian social and welfare policy debates reflects this tendency (Morton, 2000:10)

It seems, then, that in the discourse of Western metaphysics, the language of community and collectivity is paired in opposition to that of individualism and particularity. And in the attempt to maintain social order dominant political philosophies have worked hard to suppress the dangerous individual differences that might threaten order, by folding them into a notion of community in which oneness/sameness rules and difference is ‘overcome’. Clearly, both meanings of community resonate with dominant representations of economy. On the one hand, the unified organismic image of the capitalist economy (ruled by the sphere of production and its dynamics of profitability) builds upon the notion of a community absorbed into oneness—a community sustained by the health of the capitalist body economic (Gibson-Graham, 1996, Chapter 5). And on the other, the atomized image of multiple rational economic actors (both enterprises and consumers) who constitute that economic whole called market capitalism builds upon the notion of a community of mutually obligated and indebted individuals. Here community is sustained by adherence to the rights of contract and the rules of supply and demand. In Australia it would seem that the recent rise of ‘community’ discourse in policy circles is inextricably linked to new debates about economic ‘management’. As Morton notes:

The cult of the community beckons seductively, promising a remedy for the “predicament of modernity”. It’s a remedy that is eminently palatable to both the established Left and Right because it promises them the chance to have their neo-liberal cake and eat it: the Howard Government endorses “freedom” and “autonomy” in the economic sphere, and opposes government intervention in the market, while sanctioning intrusive intervention in people’s lives in the name of conservative “community values”.

What Morton fails to address in his cautionary tale is the way that the tensions between difference/divergence and oneness/sameness are being acted out spatially as national interest and regional interests are seen to bifurcate. We can’t escape the fact that the reemergence of ‘community’ discourse has coincided with Hansonism and the dramatic portrayal of crises in ‘rural and regional Australia’. So as community has entered policy debate via a new language of economic management, it has also assumed its inherently geographical association with the ‘local’ and place based concerns.

In light of criticisms of the term such as those of Morton and insights into the complex political genealogy of ‘community’ discourse, it is perhaps timely to share some reflections on the status of the contemporary research agenda associated with this contested term. In February of 2000 we were asked by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute (AHURI) to present an overview paper on the topic of “Transforming communities” to an in-house planning workshop which was considering the research agenda for the coming year. We were asked to consider what were the policy issues and research questions associated with the issue of transforming communities—what was known, what were the research gaps and what, in our opinion, were the research priorities?

With little explanation as to why this topic was on the potential research agenda of AHURI, and no guidelines given as to how to define ‘community’ or ‘transformation’ we can only assume that this request came out of the cult movement that Morton claims has taken hold of Australian policy debate—his view that “ ‘Building communities’ has become a mantra for politicians of all persuasions” (p.11). Given the limited time available to us, we jumped into the research and writing process with the decision to accept all and any definitions of ‘community’ and ‘transformation’ that we came across in the literature. This paper is unabashedly based upon our rather idiosyncratic overview prepared for AHURI. As such it reflects, however, our own interest in promoting

new ways of accommodating social difference and economic diversity within traditional conceptions of both community and economy. It is intended as an initial contribution to what we hope might become a prolonged exchange about research directions in this contested field of 'community transformation' that is so central to urban and regional policy at present.

## **POLICY RELEVANT RESEARCH**

People all over the world are negotiating rapid social, economic and technological change and in both contexts of growth and decline, specific communities experience stress as resources are reallocated and new forms of social differentiation emerge. In Australia the fear of an 'underclass' developing often rests upon an 'area-based' analysis of social problems, and recently regional and spatial disparities have been highlighted in political debate. While *communities of interest* have become more vocal about their 'needs' over the past few decades, today *place-based communities* are increasingly occupying the limelight. Policy makers are interested in how all communities cope with change, how they adjust or transform themselves, and how government policy interacts with other social and economic dynamics to effect 'successful' community outcomes.

The existing knowledge base is divided into two main areas, 1) descriptions of the patterns of differentiation and inequality across regions and communities in Australia and arguments pertaining to the various dynamics that have contributed to this patterning, and 2) accounts of numerous projects designed as responses to change and disadvantage, hosted by government, the private sector and community groups and aimed at intervening in regional and community development.

The major area of research concentration has been that of identifying communities in need through a process of documenting the spatial spread of disadvantage (e.g. Gregory 1995; Gregory & Hunter 1995; National Institute of Economic and Industry Research 1998 & 1999; Vinson 1999; Walmsley, 1996). The geographic analysis of factors like population, employment, income levels and educational achievement highlights growing disparities between communities across Australia. Research has focused upon regional typologies and discussion of the particular set of dynamics that are influencing different 'types' of regions (core metro versus producer or rural based regions, for example) (National Institute of Economic and Industry Research, 1998). Terms such as underclass, urban ghettos, neighbourhood pathologies, cultures of disadvantage, often borrowed from overseas debates, have been linked to statistical analyses of spatial differentiation and heightened polarization (Gregory, 1995; Birrell and Byung, 1998). Characteristically, studies recommend that the most disadvantaged communities

be the targets of special assistance in order to break the growing inequalities between regions and the hypothesized 'cycle of intergenerational unemployment and poverty' in certain communities.

One of the limitations of this type of research is that the technical description of disadvantage sheds little light upon processes of community change and transformation. Policy-makers are urged to respond to the array of social and economic problems identified but are offered little practical guidance as to how to proceed. Recommendations invariably refer only to the broadest level of industry, employment, education, health, family, housing and other support for disadvantaged communities. A telling insight into this mismatch between research and intervention is evident in Vinson's (1999) finding that of seven Newcastle suburbs identified more than twenty-five years ago as severely disadvantaged, the circumstances of five in 1999 are unchanged. There is a risk that by repeatedly designating certain areas as disadvantaged and attaching unexamined labels such as 'ghetto' and 'bad neighbourhood pathology' to these localities, local communities are stigmatised and a sense of victimhood intensified.

At least six different types of strategies for responding to communities in need have been initiated and are discussed in the literature; conventional economic development, local economic development, integrated community and economic development, community development, challenging stereotypes and area improvement.

Based on the assumption that economic growth in the private sector underpins viable and healthy communities much attention has focussed on the economic development of disadvantaged communities. According to *conventional economic development* models government has a key role encouraging private sector investment. In this vein, emphasis at federal government level has been to stimulate economic activity through regional infrastructure provision and skills development of the workforce. Federally funded initiatives include the Regional Assistance Program (and the previous government's Working Nation program), and the establishment of agencies like Area Consultative Committees (and the now defunded Regional Economic Development Organisations). Characteristically, state and local government economic development approaches complement federal initiatives through competitive marketing of regions and localities, provision of various incentives for new private sector investment and support for expansion of local businesses.

In recent years *local economic development* techniques have been formulated to respond to a range of concerns, for example, that outside investment was failing to deliver all that was promised in terms of sustained job-growth (particularly in high-tech industries); that many small and hard hit communities were simply missing out on private sector investment; and that federally designed and funded programs were not responsive to specific

local conditions and issues. Instead of relying on solutions to come from outside sources, local economic development strategies encourage development of locally based responses, primarily in the form of self-employment and small business. Valuing local resources, developing local leadership and fostering a culture of entrepreneurialism are key techniques advocated by practitioners (e.g. Kenyon, 1999; Sirolli, 1999; Wildman, 1992; Wildman & Hubley, 1992).

Conventional and local economic development approaches can be seen as trying to find a balance between 'top-down' government funding, and 'bottom-up' local control and decision-making as a way of stimulating economic growth in the private sector. The overall aim of both is to establish viable economic enterprises in the private sector (whether small locally owned businesses or larger export orientated firms) as the foundation for a healthy community. Evaluation of programs is invariably in terms of easily quantifiable economic indicators: dollars invested, value of produce exported, number of jobs created, number of small business start-ups and so on. It is less clear what the wider, non-economic benefits are for communities (especially in the longer-term), and what some of the qualitative economic benefits are (such as who gets employed or who starts-up small businesses).

Concerned that there is an over-emphasis on the purely economic and that the role of community practices have been underplayed, a number of approaches have sought to *integrate community and economic development*. In the late 1980s the National Advisory Group on Local Employment Initiatives (LEIs) advocated community-owned enterprises (namely co-operatives, municipal enterprises, community businesses and socially focused enterprises) as having the potential to address economic and social goals, particularly in declining communities (National Advisory Group on Local Employment Initiatives, 1987; Windschuttle 1987). Despite support for the concept (e.g. Fagan 1987), few of the recommendations, which included the establishment of LEI Corporations and Finance Trusts along the lines of Community Development Corporations in North America, were implemented.

There are some parallels between LEIs and the community-based initiatives supported through the Department of Social Security's action research element of the Community Research Project (Smith & Herbert 1997). Based on the idea that living standards of people on low incomes could be enhanced by access to non-cash goods and services, 80 community enterprises in four disadvantaged regions across Australia received on average \$18,000 for twelve months. The ventures included community gardens, food and furniture co-operatives, and LETS (Local Exchange and Trading Scheme) projects. Although evaluation of the project took place within the twelve-month period and focussed primarily on outcomes for individuals there were some indications that

enterprises made positive contributions more generally to communities. Building upon this insight the Federal Department of Family and Community Services has recently launched the “Family and Community Initiatives Program” to further support community based projects.

In a similar vein, the Community Partnering Project, initiated by Monash University and Latrobe City (and jointly funded by the Australian Research Council and Latrobe City, with support from Australian Paper and Loy Yang Power), has recently been supporting groups of people hard hit by economic change in the Latrobe Valley to develop community-focussed economic enterprises (<http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/projects/cep/projects/cpp.html>). The project will result in resource materials for other local councils interested in strategies for working with people who have been marginalised to generate community initiatives.

Attempts have been made to explicate the relationship between community and economic development through the concept of social capital. In a reversal of the valuing that is given to economy and community in traditional economic development models, it is argued that social relationships of trust, reciprocity and shared norms provide the ground for economic relationships to prosper (and democratic institutions to flourish) (e.g. Cox 1995). Researchers have developed tools for empirically measuring the amount of social capital in communities (e.g. Bullen & Onyx, 1998). Where social capital is found to be low, efforts can be directed towards building community relationships as a precondition for economic development.

Alongside the different models of economic development are a variety of *community development* techniques for transforming communities. The Community Audit Kit produced by the People Together Project (1998) in Victoria is one recent example that uses the strategy of bringing together a diverse range of community stakeholders to assess community needs and develop a vision for the future. Specific mechanisms and strategies for acting on the needs and vision are, however, missing. As with the studies of disadvantage referred to above, the emphasis is on assembling the right set of information, but here the assumption seems to be that by handing responsibility for the needs assessment to local people rather than outside researchers, they will know how best to respond. Although pilots were conducted in seven communities across Victoria no evaluation of outcomes is readily available.

The Centre for Rural Communities has developed a Study Circle Kit (Sheil 1997) that employs a collaborative educational model to equip local people with the skills to work together to operationalise their vision for the future. To date, only a few communities have completed the kit but where they have, community-based projects involving partnerships with government and addressing key community concerns have been initiated (Sheil 1999).

An important intervention into community development has been offered by John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993) from Northwestern University. They argue that most models are based on an assessment of a community's needs, whereas effective community transformation starts with the strengths, skills, capacities, dreams and aspirations of local people. They have developed a range of tools to identify and mobilise a community's 'assets'. Used extensively across North America, their approach has had impressive results. For example, Banana Kelly Community Improvement Association in the South Bronx, which uses Assets-Based Community Development (ABCD), is a key initiator of the Bronx Community Paper Company which will recycle half of the waste paper collected in the City of New York (<http://www.bronxpaper.org>).

Kretzmann and McKnight's approach *challenges stereotypes*, demonstrating how even the most seemingly disadvantaged communities in the inner urban areas of large North American cities contain assets and resources that have the potential to transform communities. In the Australian context, Gibson, Cameron and Veno (1999) show how the discourse of economic restructuring has dominated and constrained visions of community transformation in the Latrobe Valley and Shepparton. They offer a research intervention that challenges the stereotype of disempowered regional communities by bringing to light other representations of the economy and highlighting instances where communities have built on their strengths and capacities to respond innovatively to social and economic change.

A final approach to transforming communities has focussed on the built environment and *area improvement* strategies. Federally funded programs, like the previous Government's Building Better Cities, have addressed quality of life issues and sought to involve a coordinated approach by government in major urban renewal and infrastructure projects. At a State Government level, Main Street revitalisation programs have been developed to assist local communities improve the physical, social and business environments of their town centres. Other projects like the Mapping Culture project of the Commonwealth Department of Communications and the Arts (1995) provide a mechanism for local groups to develop their cultural resources.

In summary, emphasis has been placed on describing patterns of disadvantage, defining the *needs* of communities and regions and formulating and initiating area-based projects largely driven by an economic development agenda.

## **POLICY ISSUES**

We have identified a number of broad policy issues that emerge from the literature and need to be debated if we are to get beyond the warm fuzzy aura of the C-word to its usefulness in the practice of governance.

### **How should government target ‘communities’?**

There are many different ways in which government policy intersects ‘communities’ and place, and the relationship between these policies and ‘community transformation’ is not transparent. Federally funded Migrant Resource Centres, for example, service migrants from non-English speaking backgrounds and offer a wide range of educative, informational, job and health-related services in centres located in proximity to urban areas of high ethnic community concentration. Policies such as those relating to child care and home and community services provide services on a needs basis to target groups who may or may not see themselves as area-based ‘communities’. Industry specific interventions (such as TCF policies or the steel plan) and service rationalization (such as hospital and school closures) have marked area impacts as a significant side effect. All these policies produce change at the local community level while their primary policy focus is directed elsewhere.

Policies that specifically target places as opposed to individuals or activities in place (including regional development initiatives, area regeneration and infrastructure development) are often seen as taking a one size fits all approach (Senate Committee, 1999). All three levels of government have offered generic policies aimed to apply across the board. Some communities have taken more advantage of the programs on offer than others. Significant spatial variation in the types of stresses experienced by communities (in their level of ‘disadvantage’ if you like) remains and is not likely to be addressed by generalized policy initiatives. The danger, however, of implementing targeted policies directed at those areas in ‘most need’ is that communities get bound up in demonstrating their needs, deficiencies and deserving status, thereby diverting attention from their assets and capacities and the process of policy intervention becomes a vehicle for community disempowerment.

### **What sort of resourcing of communities undergoing transformation is appropriate from government?**

Concern in recent years has shifted from how to manage the input of resources into communities and regions to how to manage the withdrawal of resources in the form of public goods (e.g. schools, tertiary educational institutions, post offices, railway services, state authorities) from localities. This has led to a questioning of the rationale of economic efficiency and the register upon which efficiency is evaluated and in this vein the issues raised are: Is there a threshold of public services that any community must possess in order to be

sustainable? And if so, how might the process of rationalization and that of re-sourcing by government be better balanced?

If there is to be direct resourcing of communities, how best should it occur and in what form? Is it acceptable to offer finances for certain types of initiatives and then to expect the community to mobilize to access these funds? This process relies upon prior identification of the types of initiatives that might seem appropriate and will be likely to draw out already established organizations, associations and networks to access the resources made available. Is it feasible to consider the offering of resources in kind, for example, in the form of programs to develop community leadership and to generate a grass roots policy agenda that can be supported by funding at a later date? This process might contribute to the capacity building of communities such that more widespread and long lasting outcomes are produced.

### **What is the role of the private sector in transforming communities?**

Capital investment does not always translate into jobs and community sustainability, especially when it is capital investment in technologically advanced production systems. Yet much local government energy is directed at attracting private investment into the municipality. One community's gain (growth) is often another's loss (rationalization and/or closure). Increasingly there is a demand that some strings be attached to the offer of cheap land, reduced rates and other relocation incentives.

New models of community-business-government partnership are emerging in which business commitment to the locality is not necessarily only in the form of private investment, but in such areas as youth training (e.g. Goulburn Valley Food Cadetships), job retraining (e.g. BHP Newcastle Pathways Project), cultural events, exit strategies (e.g. the BHP Newcastle steel closure plan). How might government policies enhance and proliferate the models of private sector involvement in transforming communities?

### **Who participates in policy formulation?**

The implementation of policies designed to assist communities is often the point at which the policy process breaks down. Problems of implementation are linked, by many, to the top-down nature of policy formulation. Good ideas thought up by professionals are rarely owned and developed by communities. And 'community consultation' to ensure successful implementation is often a code word for 'informing the community of what's in store for them—with a few insignificant details left to be decided upon *by the community*'. There may not be a loud clamour from the grass roots to be included in processes of policy formulation as many communities, particularly those who have become used to the label 'disadvantaged', have been lulled into thinking that they have no ideas to offer, or that 'they' (government) should be doing something

about the situation. This is not surprising, as avenues for the development and practice of active citizenship have not multiplied in recent times. The challenge is to open up policy formulation processes so that community input and ownership can be enhanced and the diversity of community experiences responded to appropriately.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH DIRECTIONS**

In our opinion, a number of significant theoretical and empirical gaps emerge from the preceding discussion.

What appears to be lacking is any attempt to

- define and theorize the process of community transformation,
- research the effectiveness of different models of implementing 'positive' change, and
- evaluate the impact upon communities of established or past projects that have been initiated the name of regional and community development.

We suggest that in order to operationalize a research agenda it might be useful to conceptualize community transformation in terms of three key relationships between 1) community and economy, 2) community and citizenship, and 3) environment and community. In each of these areas there is a need for:

- **Conceptual research** into how we think about these relationships, as they underpin theories of community change and expectations about what policy can achieve.
- **Case study research** to document the common elements, innovative features, impacts of transformative processes and projects that communities are already implementing at a local level.
- **Action research** that pilots innovative projects developed elsewhere (perhaps overseas) in new locales or tests out new approaches.
- **Evaluation research** into already implemented projects that attempted to or inadvertently produced community transformations.

### **1. Understanding community – economy relations**

There remains a dominant orthodoxy that sees community transformation as determined by a community's economic base. Employment and investment are seen to be the life-blood of community health. And investment and employment multipliers are considered the most effective measure of economic development success. But how do economic flows 'create' and 'transform' community?

Conventional business investment and multiplier models of local economic development assume that what benefits business, benefits the community. There is a certain faith that economic growth in the private sector

will have a **trickle down** effect that will be enjoyed as higher levels of employment and income by the whole community. Over the years numerous regional economic development interventions have been implemented in Australia but there is scant evidence of any attempts to evaluate their success. Where have conventional economic development policies successfully contributed to community transformation? What have been the elements of this success?

Within the community economic development literature there is an interest in harnessing and directing the way in which 'trickle down' takes place. Advocates of mutual associations and cooperativism link the creation of more inclusive and equitable economic communities to the ability to collectively appropriate economic surplus and distribute it to projects that support community sustainability. The Basque region's Mondragon experiment has seen collectivized surplus flow into the development of increasing numbers of local cooperatives, local educational institutions, social security and health provision for Basque cooperators. Classic employment multiplier measures indicate the success of this experiment (the cooperatives currently employ over 30,000 people) but cannot track the specific nature of the flows that have created such success. To what extent is economic diversity a prerequisite for building sustainable communities? How might we develop more finely tuned ways of monitoring surplus allocations and distributions within communities and tracking their effects on community transformation?

With increasing interest in corporate citizenship and new models of community-business partnerships there is a need to document innovative practices and experiences that may be contributing to community transformation. Many businesses take a proactive role in regional and community development, initiating links between educational institutions and industry through work experience programs, informally supporting alternative businesses via access to waste product or financial advice and so on. The documentation of best practice examples of corporate citizenship in a community context would provide a knowledge base to be used in future policy formulation. For example, a detailed analysis of BHP's Newcastle steelworks closure strategy, the "Pathways Project", might provide a new bench mark for future regional industry closures.

What interaction might there be between community development and strategies to promote local economic development? Community development interventions are more likely to set in motion processes that **percolate up** effecting and influencing economic activities in a range of unspecified ways. Increasing interest in the notion of social capital has drawn attention to the non-monetary resources embedded in institutions, social networks and familial relationships that individuals and groups draw upon to support entrepreneurial activity and community sustainability (Portes, 1998; Putnam, 1993). Feminist economic research has highlighted the diverse

nature of household economies and the role they play in sustaining community 'health'. Household self-provisioning and the neighbourhood trade or barter of goods produced in the domestic sector are crucial aspects of many communities' survival strategy, especially where severe economic downturn in the formal sector has taken place.

How might we see interventions into community development, such as the building of associational capacity, as an input into local economic development? Numerous examples of projects that seek to transform both area-based and interest-based communities are available for analysis in these terms. Take, for example, CERES, a not-for-profit community garden and environmental park in inner Melbourne that has a yearly budget of \$1.6 million, is 60 per cent self-funded, and has 25 equivalent full-time positions; or Work Focus, a not-for-profit organisation in the Latrobe Valley that runs a surplus-generating woodworking enterprise to subsidise a series of community focussed initiatives like a community wood workshop, a workspace for artisans who are seeking to become self-employed, and computer training programs for young people at risk of homelessness. There are also transformative initiatives developed by communities of interest: for example, Rumbalara Football Netball Club in the Goulburn Valley, started by the local Aboriginal community as a reconciliation and Healthy Lifestyles project, was central to the development of First Nation Credit Union, the first financial institution in Australia targeting the needs of and run by an Aboriginal community. These community projects designed around non-economic agendas are, nevertheless, producing economic effects with the potential to percolate up. Projects such as these need to be adequately documented so that they can provide useful input into future policy interventions.

Research also has a role to play as an action-orientated endeavour, piloting new forms of community intervention. Community projects in the so-called non-economic sphere have the potential to produce new community self-perceptions, training, transition into jobs in the formal labour market and new economic activities such as self-employment or cooperative ventures. Action research projects might work with communities in disadvantaged areas introducing models developed elsewhere or piloting new community interventions that address, for example, waste management issues, cultural maintenance and celebration, or developing the capacities to organize collective, community based economic activities.

## **2. Understanding community – citizenship relations**

The issue of community transformation ultimately rests, it would seem, upon the shoulders of citizens, that is of acting subjects who see themselves as having individual and community rights and responsibilities. But

how are subjects constituted as members of a community and as active members of a society? Many disadvantaged communities are populated by individuals whose experience of citizenship is under threat. When people's ability to negotiate survival via the market place is limited, a key element of their individual freedom in our society is compromised. Unable to find adequate employment, people are rendered dependent on the state and treated with increasing disdain, or are forced to rely on individual savings and private sector payouts that they must self-manage in a somewhat precarious financial climate. In the face of diminished capacity to act as independent economic citizens, calls to reinvigorate 'community' that draw upon romanticised and nostalgic references to a static and idealised model of organic connection, trust and mutuality are in danger of falling on deaf ears.

We need to know more about what has been the community impact of the delivery of safety net policies in disadvantaged areas? How have the individuated mechanisms of survival resourcing (social security payments, health care, retrenchment payouts) created or restricted the community building capacities of subjects and citizens? How might survival resourcing be offered in ways that promote the mutuality associated with civicness and the development of social capital? Are there ways of promoting active citizenship and community responsibility without linking these qualities to formal employment?

Again there are examples at hand that need adequate documentation and evaluation. Social security payments to some remote Aboriginal communities are currently being pooled and offered as a community entitlement as a way of promoting mutuality and local capacity building. Experiments with micro-credit schemes for indigenous Australians that build upon the trust and vigilance of social networks are being piloted in certain communities to enhance and support small indigenous business ventures, particularly those organized by women. Random selection democracy is a process that has been trialled by the City of Lismore as a strategy for generating more active forms of citizenship and involvement in decision making, particularly by the elderly, at a local level.

Past interventions designed to activate citizens at the local level include the Australian Assistance Plan of the 1970s. There is anecdotal evidence that the impact of this short-lived policy and the subsequent implementation of Neighbourhood Houses in many communities was significant in mobilizing the considerable resources, particularly of women, towards community (and personal) transformation during the 1970s and 80s. In one rural Victorian city that we have worked in the impact of this intervention was seen to be responsible for the lead many women have taken in reshaping the local economy. It appears that there is interesting qualitative research to be done in tracing the impacts of past policy interventions such as these on community and regional transformation.

With many local areas locked into a strategy of competing with others for their portion of the funding pie or private investment dollar; and with many identity groups feeling that others are receiving more than their fair share from the public purse, there is a need for action research that pilots new connections across geographic communities and communities of interest (perhaps via telecommunications and internet technology) and that helps to create new expressions and experiences of 'civicness' in our society.

### **3 Understanding environment – community relations**

Considerable amounts of public funds have been allocated to transport infrastructure, place-making activities and the physical regeneration of areas in an attempt to revitalize disadvantaged localities. Infrastructural development and improvements in the built environment are seen to enhance the business climate and increase the potential for community revitalization. Environmental determinism is still a strong influence in the architectural and urban design fields and this feeds into the view that places that look good, make people feel good and perhaps even be good. But just how are improvements in an area's physical environment linked to community transformation?

Transport interventions increase mobility both into and out of localities. Being better connected by new transport routes and services to 'the centre' works both ways for disadvantaged communities. It widens the range of commuting scope allowing residents access to a larger number of employment sites, but it also opens the area to an influx of new residents whose work and lives are perhaps centred outside the community. Given that mobility is something that the less well-off are not always able to participate in, better transport connection has the potential to exacerbate community polarization.

Tracts of run down public or private rental housing, streets of closed shop fronts and vandalized public spaces contribute to the labeling of communities as disadvantaged, even by community members themselves. Imported and objectively quite unsuited tags such as 'the Bronx' are used to designate physically devalued areas within communities. Visual images of these areas are often used by the media to dramatically highlight the difference between these 'other' communities and normal 'healthy' communities. In these ways the physical environment is drawn into legitimating discourses of disadvantage and deficiency.

In many areas, especially those older places that underwent development during earlier periods of economic boom, there are many examples of unused or under-utilized physical resources and infrastructure such as community halls, sporting grounds and parks. These represent community assets that often do not enter into the calculus of community representation. Area regeneration and place making often rests upon a needs and

deficiencies analysis and projects are focused upon one-off inputs, often designed and built by outsiders to a standard formula (e.g. main street malls, the 'Big oyster/potato/gem stone', the heritage village, renovated public housing).

When given the opportunity, community members are often very interested in being involved in environmental projects such as community gardens, housing renovation, stream bank revegetation, building adventure playgrounds or waste management projects. How might area regeneration projects tap the skills and interests of community members and become community managed? Can area regeneration generate local jobs for local people? How can community members have some input into the design and nature of such projects? Again best practice examples of cases where communities have 'owned their own' area regeneration project need to be documented so that they can be replicated elsewhere.

## CONCLUSION

Community is "warm": its members are bound together by ties of affection, loyalty and tradition. Civil society, by contrast, is "cool": it is governed by law rather than tradition, and its social cement is respect rather than affection, a respect that must crucially be given to strangers as well as members of our "community".....

Increasingly, the new dividing lines in politics will be drawn between those of us who embrace the "warmth" of community as a cure for the predicament of modernity, and those of us who prefer a "cool" democracy, both liberal and social—one that would try to provide the enabling framework for people to exercise both their personal autonomy and their social responsibilities, without at the same time presuming to tell them how they ought to live. (Morton, 2000:11)

In the absence of informed research into questions of community, transformation and governance, the kind of dismissive conclusions drawn by Tom Morton above can easily be made. The complexity of understandings of community are thus ignored and the potential for interventions in the name of community to accentuate tolerance of difference and the enabling capacities of individuals are likely to remain unrecognized. In our view, there is a pressing need to develop a more nuanced and anti-essentialist understanding of the constitution of communities and processes of community transformation, not least because the C-word is now solidly on the policy agenda.

Given our particular orientation to research practice (see Gibson-Graham, 2000) we would like to see priority given to researching and developing mechanisms for promoting active citizenship within in all types of communities, but especially in disadvantaged areas. And we would encourage the design of action research projects that identify the ways of mobilizing subjects and groups that appear to be of greatest use. In the hope of promoting a vigorous debate on this topic, we would like to conclude our discussion with a wish list of research topics as a step towards developing a research agenda on *transforming communities*.

- Document a variety of case studies where trickle down and percolate up processes have and have not produced marked and successful community effects.
- Document best practice Australian examples of corporate citizenship in a community context.
- Evaluate the long-term community impact of established projects such as REDOs and ACCs, or the DSS's Community Research Project.
- On the basis of these qualitative inputs, model community-economy flows.
- Produce new measures of community sustainability (e.g. of economic diversity, household economies, associational connection, business-community links).
- Outline action research projects designed to test out in new contexts best practice models of trickle down and percolate up interventions into community transformation
- Document best practice examples of projects that promote active and sustained involvement in a range of tasks by community members, especially those usually marginalized from decision-making processes (youth unemployed, retrenched, disabled, elderly, NESB).
- Trace some of the effects of interventions such as the AAP on community transformation in specific locations.
- Pilot action research projects that replicate or develop new techniques of increasing active participation in community building.
- Pilot action research projects that include community members (including business partners) in the development and management of area regeneration.

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