

Governments and Facilitating Community Grassroots Wellbeing Action

A discussion paper prepared by Connexion – a Community Grassroots Action (CGA) Network

Twenty four years ago the Australian Prime Minister and the Federal Health Minister were very keen to fund a community engaged in wellbeing action. This community refused to take the money. This paper details why the Government of the day wanted to give money, and why the Community firmly refused to take money they sorely needed.

The attachment to this paper was written in 1993 in response to this request from the Australian Federal Government's Rural Health Support Education and Training (RHSET), a section of the Federal Health Department to a Community Grassroots Action (CGA) network called UN-INMA¹ for this network to send in an application for funding. It is understood that Prime Minister Paul Keating and Health Minister Graham Richardson:

- Had heard of UN-INMA Programs in Remote Area Communities in the Australia Top End
- Were keen to support their wider application, and
- Had requested RHSET to contact UN-INMA to inform them:
 - That funding would be made available and
 - How to apply for funds.

The UN-INMA Program's themes and processes were using holistic mutual-help in:

- Stopping:
 - Family Violence
 - Inter-Generational Dysfunction
 - Self-Harm and Harm to Others
 - Civil Disobedience and Criminality
 - Inter-Cultural Conflict
- Re-socializing people who had disconnected from self and others
- Restoring and Sustaining Biological, Psychological, Emotional, and Social Wellbeing

There were serious community concerns that accepting government funding would *inevitably* compromise CGA. Over fifty questions were to be answered in the application form. Over 70% of the questions were not applicable as all questions assumed Government Way was to be used. CGA uses very different ways. There were sustained instances of mismatching. The concern was that Government way would collapse CGA way.

The 1993 Discussion Paper (included below) was carefully worded in setting out the communities concerns. A person connected with UN-INMA met with the Head of RHSET and Head of Programs, Head of Policy and another senior department planner in Canberra. RHSET people said that they were prepared to 'bend all of their rules' to accommodate community concerns. The visitor encouraged a discussion in depth on the issues raised in the discussion paper. At the end of this discussion it was agreed by all present that:

- The Federal Government had *no* framework for interfacing with Community Grassroots Action
- There *were* major differences between the Ways used by Government and CGA
- While RHSET was prepared to bend their rules, CGA way *would be inevitably compromised and collapsed* by Government Way
- RHSET people stated that the CGA Way specified in the discussion paper was *at least 25 years ahead of its time*

¹ Refer reference to UN-INMA in Yeomans, N. (1980). *From the Outback*. International Journal of Therapeutic Vol 1, Issue 1.

UN-INMA *did* refuse funding and CGA rollout has been slower. We understand that the reasons for refusing funding along with the discussion paper were sent to both Prime Minister Keating and Graham Richardson. A fundamental concern goes to the profound differences between the Government Way and the CGA Way outlined below:

Government Way	CGA Way
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Top Down ○ Dividing the World into Sectors ○ Expert Service Delivery ○ Doing Things for Others ○ Qualified Experts with Knowhow ○ Highly Evolved Policy that is Determined Centrally and Applied Uniformly ○ Evaluation at Program End ○ Criteria for Funding – Compliance with All of the Above 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Local and Lateral ○ Holistic and Integrated ○ Community Mutual-Help ○ Doing Things for Ourselves ○ Using Ways that Work ○ Highly Evolved Policy Derived from Actions that Work. Therefore CGA Policy Works. ○ Evaluating Occurs Continually ○ CGA has Its Own <i>very Different</i> Criteria Guiding Action

Community Grassroots Action (CGA) has been active at the margins for decades. CGA tends to be little known by government or non-government people alike. Folk engaged in CGA rarely if ever seek funding from traditional sources, hence CGA tends to go unnoticed. **With the passage of 24 years since the 1993 RHSET interaction, perhaps it's timely to raise this theme of Government and Facilitating Community Grassroots Action again.** Perhaps a dialogue could be developed about evolving a specific area of government (at each level of government) especially charged with the responsibility of Facilitating Community Grassroots Action using CGA criteria as set out in the right-hand column above rather than the typical Government criteria and way. To reiterate the 1993 document, Connexion and resonant CGA Networks are well placed to take on a number of roles in exploring the possibility of government facilitation of grassroots community wellbeing action. Such action may well address issues where service delivery is stretched beyond capacity and where local community knowing is vital for success.

Firstly, CGA Networks can continue to expand their current Grassroots Community Action role. One example is the current community initiatives of Glocal Village linked with the historic Point Cook Homestead and Marine Park in Victoria where there's still evidence that *community self-sufficiency* was the hallmark of early pioneering rural life.

Secondly, we can work alongside government to develop processes for resolving the many matters arising from this discussion paper.

Thirdly, we could provide an interface and support role between government and grassroots nurturing action. This could relate to the evolving of action agreements and other funding arrangements for specific local action initiatives.

CGA networking is spreading throughout the Australia, Oceania SE Asia Region with global implications. There are instances where CGA works well in resolving significant community wellbeing issues especially in contexts where expert service delivery is stretched beyond capacity. This is detailed in the attachment, the document that was discussed with RHSET in 1993, and which we understand was sent to Prime Minister Keating and Health Minister Richardson by RHSET along with their comments on the discussion with the UN-INMA person. With the changing political landscape, now is the time to unleash this potential to both drive down costs and increase community potential, resilience and wellbeing

We welcome sharing discussions about the ideas and initiatives outlined above.

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Written 1993. Latest Update – Jan 2017.

A discussion paper prepared by Connexion – a Community Grassroots Wellbeing Action (CGWA) Network formed in the 1960s with links to UN-INMA and other CGA networks.

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From small beginnings in the 1940's community-based grassroots wellbeing action is taking place across Northern Australia and spreading throughout the SE Asia Oceania Australasia Region. A ground swell of people is cooperating in taking their own responsibility to resolve a massive range of cultural wellbeing issues. In the past these issues have fallen to governments to resolve because no other entity had the capacity to have an impact.

If grassroots community wellbeing nurturing action continues its exponential growth, the potential to lower the present cost involved in service delivery is immense. The role of governments, for large sections of the wellbeing agenda, has scope to change from 'deliverer of services' to that of 'facilitator of local cultural nurturing action' - self help.

This grassroots nurturing cultural action for wellbeing is called by some 'The Laceweb'. In many contexts the Way is un-named – or goes under many local names that typically link to foci of action. (Samples – firstly, 'CHUMS,' standing for 'Care and Help for Unmarried Mums'; secondly, 'Mingles', a CGA Intercultural Social Meet-up Network, and thirdly, the Manoora Urban Renewal Project – an example of parallel action between government service delivery and community mutual-help). The Laceweb could be a micro-model for an alternative wellbeing delivery process running parallel to service delivery, not only for Australia, but also for the rest of the world.

The grassroots wellbeing action being described differs in many respects from traditional non-government organisations (NGO) and community based organisations (CBO), both voluntary and non-voluntary.

In this paper the term 'grassroots' is used in the sense of 'the common folk'. Often the people involved have never engaged in socio-cultural action before - have never been on a committee, exercised any problem solving effectiveness or dreamt that they could have an effect.

'Wellbeing' is used in the widest possible sense and covers the nurturing healing aspects of human living. This includes physical, socio-emotional, mental, spiritual, relational, family, communal, cultural, intercultural, economic, habitat and environmental. 'Nurturing cultural action' implies 'healing' in its widest sense.

Self-sufficiency was the hallmark of Australia's early non-aboriginal pioneering and rural life. At the very first settlement, the Rum Corps assisted in the stripping of the cultural context of all inhabitants - Aboriginal, Irish, Anglo, and the like. These contexts it replaced with an invasive military culture. Issues impacting on wellbeing (health, housing, community services, etc) in the colonies became so massive that governments have become increasingly a main vehicle for delivering wellbeing related services. This has generated a system of top-down action delivered by thousands of experts in academic, government and non-government bodies who, together with their administrative backup, sort out aspects of our lives for us. Behind these are even more thousands of bureaucrats who keep track of what all these experts are doing for us.

Most wellbeing issues revolve around what we do or do not do as we go about our lives; that is, our culture. A very small proportion of loss of wellbeing relates to the action of germs, viruses, and chance occurrence. Some wellbeing loss is attributable to business decision-makers (pollution, environmental degradation, and the like).

A very large proportion is self-imposed or imposed on others - substance abuse, domestic violence, becoming insane, committing crime, poor eating habits and life styles, polluting, causing soil erosion and so on. It is trivially true that if people stopped behaviours like the ones mentioned, most wellbeing issues, currently costing billions, would be solved without costing a cent. But it's not that simple.

Across Northern Australia influences are being generated that are placing the impetus for nurturing cultural action for wellbeing back at the place it breaks down - with local people as they go about their lives. It is a lateral and bottom-up action. Small groups engage in action and keep using practices that work for them. Others become involved and initiatives, starting 'at the bottom', work their way 'out' and 'up' to include more of the wider community.

Different communities can vary markedly as to what constitutes their wellbeing culture. Bottom-up grassroots cultural wellbeing action is about the local community exploring and making consensual decisions about what they need and want for their own wellbeing; taking the necessary steps themselves to attain their wellbeing and deciding themselves when they have not got it. Only they know this. Increasingly the people involved are saying "We do not want outsiders trying to provide our wellbeing or deciding our wellbeing for us".

Because 'Grassroots community cultural nurturing wellbeing action' is a long expression, the term 'Action' will be used from here on. The Laceweb Action taking place involves people recognising contexts of possibility and taking the opportunity to do something for themselves and others. In most cases it is the women who are taking the initiative. It involves acts celebrating diversity. It revolves around cultural healing and intercultural reconciliation.

Action expands links among individuals and families and turns strangers into friends. It builds 'communing' communities. It permeates through everyday life. It 'villages' the city. These features have multiple benefits including the removal of anomie, loneliness, powerlessness, identity issues etc.

Initiatives are involving people in acting together to take back ability over their own lives. Experts are used as resource people and not as power brokers and decision-makers. Nurturing culture involves ways of joint action that continually spreads and enriches the wellbeing competence base throughout the local community. People are engaged in passing on diverse wellbeing micro-experiences, for example, in providing community based family and individual support.

Wellbeing-competence is refined and passed on in natural settings as well as during specific structured contexts; for example, the intercultural family centre previously explored in Rapid Creek - Darwin, far north Queensland intercultural diversionary services, South Sea Islander initiatives and Vietnamese Helping Hand health and training activities. Increasingly people are being intuitively appropriate in their responses to each other. There are acts that are perfect for the moment, which also contain the seed of realistic generalisable policy.

This Action is taking place without an over-reliance on funding. At times, many people come together for specific events, celebrations and healing actions. As well, throughout every day, grassroots people are involved in myriads of significant trivial wellbeing acts. People act together to support each other at appropriate times. Most actions do not rely on money.

Action combines the structured and the general, the formal and the informal. It creatively and positively uses community grapevines. It has a self-sustaining energy. Specific and general programs evolve out of action. In all of this, Laceweb Action is generative. It is a dynamic expanding process that continually subjects Action to review. Evaluation processes proceed in tandem with Action. Programs and actions that 'work' are passed on to others, consensually validated and adopted as policy at the local level. Action is simultaneously addressing everything undermining wellbeing. It is both pervasively holistic and detailed within its holism. Action is focused on all the inter-related issues involved - simultaneously working on impediments to, for example, economic, socio-emotional and environmental wellbeing. Because of the multifaceted nature of nurturing Action, it tends to have simultaneous multiple positive consequences.

Action has three concurrent themes. The major theme is generating and nurturing wellbeing. This is closely followed by preventing impediments to wellbeing and curing those affected by impediments. Action is focused on increasing wellbeing, sustaining prevention, and decreasing the need to cure.

Another feature is that it starts with action based on consensually valid local knowledge. It commences with self-starters who have an 'outcome' focus (compared to an 'input' focus). These people start by doing things and demonstrating to others that things can be done. They get others involved who follow and extend their example. This is fundamentally different to what happens in traditional top-down expert driven processes. Experts (often with 'input' focus) tend to hold strings of planning meetings and exploratory conferences, conduct research and feasibility studies and then hold more conferences to discuss the research and explore what might be done.

With every respect, it is typical that massive time and expense is incurred in all of these expert driven processes before anyone ever does anything to solve the problem. Local grassroots nurturing action people are very familiar with local issues and immediately get on with the job in hand. Action people are not dependent on constantly seeking anyone's permission or approval, especially the approval of experts.

Action does draw on the resources of NGO's and CBO's and works in association with them without the Action itself reverting to top-down processes. Action is supported by the detailed local knowledge and the resources available within local government.

Bottom-up process can meet, complement, and facilitate the top-down approach. For example, by providing consensual small project proof about what works, the bottom-up approach can support top-down processes by allowing opportunities for top-down studies to be restricted to what does work, rather than studying and sifting through lots of things that will not work.

We live at a time when national and international attention is being focused on seemingly unsolvable intercultural reconciliation conflicts both within Australia and around the world, especially those involving indigenous people and small minorities.

At the same time in Darwin and across Northern Australia there are small living breathing microprojects of grassroots nurturing cultural action for wellbeing producing intercultural reconciliation within communities. Peoples from many cultural backgrounds - Aboriginals, Torres Strait Islanders, Asians, Pacific Islanders, Anglo-Europeans etc - are cooperating together to provide their own wellbeing.

The Australian Federal Government's aim has been to have Darwin and the surrounding region as Australia's northern link with East Asia. The world's focus will be on multicultural Australia during the lead up to the Year 2000 Olympics in Sydney. In the family of the Laceweb, governments may have a micromodel that can have national and global applicability.

There seems to be consensus between governments of all persuasions about the value of reducing the size of government expenditure and of getting better value for the public dollar. The Laceweb's nurturing cultural Action for wellbeing is a vehicle that can contribute to both of these aims. National and local governments are well placed to encourage grassroots Action. It is in the interest of governments to do so.

How can government foster this community based nurturing cultural Action?

Three issues will be introduced.

Firstly, government policy and program processes are presently geared for traditional top-down expert-driven undertakings. Currently, committees evaluating funding submissions presuppose that traditional top-down expert driven approaches will be used.

Grassroots community wellbeing action also has both policy and program processes. However these are generated by lateral and bottom-up action. Specific and general programs evolve out of this action. Programs and actions that 'work' are consensually validated and adopted as policy at the local level. The fundamental aspect of Action is that local people have the first and last say about everything to do with their own wellbeing.

A **second** issue is that governments and their bureaucracies have tended to fragment the world into narrow separate bits - economics, health, housing, agriculture, forestry, the environment etc. Each government program area tends to jealously guard onerous apparent prerogatives as a 'dispenser of public funds'. Few, if any, government inter-sector funding arrangements exist. In contrast, grassroots wellbeing action is holistic in a manner that is at the same time both pervasive and detailed.

A **third** issues is that while people may aspire to lessen public expenditure and obtain better value for the public dollar, there is a strong pressure towards putting self-preservation first if achieving the above goals appears personally detrimental.

Traditional government and non-government wellbeing agencies may see grassroots initiatives as a threat to their own funding. If grassroots wellbeing action really starts to be effective on a larger scale, this may raise a fear of presupposed downsizing within sections of the bureaucracy and a similar fear within traditional wellbeing services.

Because of these perceived threats, the foregoing entities may mistakenly seek to undermine grassroots wellbeing initiatives. They may fail to see scope for multiple lateral integration between lateral/bottom-up and top down processes, or appreciate the scope for shifting from vertical integration to lateral integration. The obvious claim from within the existing paradigm is that grassroots wellbeing action is 'unprofessional' - that it is not under the direction and control of professed experts. Also, that it is not organised 'properly' - in other words, it is not 'top-down'.

The Laceweb

The Laceweb has experience dating from the 1940's in working with healing action. The Laceweb is a source of influence, confluence, understanding and enabling in linking up peoples, contexts, issues, and actions in sustained lateral/bottom-up nurturing culture for action for wellbeing. Other Laceweb roles are seeking out people who are generating nurturing cultural Actions that work, letting other grassroots people know about them and sharing healing ways that work.

The Laceweb is well placed to take on a number of roles in exploring the possibility of government facilitation of grassroots community wellbeing action.

Firstly, The Laceweb can continue to expand in its current Action role.

Secondly, The Laceweb can work alongside government to develop processes for resolving the many matters arising from the three issues previously mentioned.

Thirdly, The Laceweb could provide an interface and support role between government and grassroots nurturing action. This could relate to the evolving of action agreements and other funding arrangements for specific local action initiatives.

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