

Partnering the 800 Pound Gorilla: Centrelink Working Locally to Create Opportunities for Participation

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This article explores the potential for government agencies to move into new kinds of relationships or 'social partnerships' with the community sector and business to address social problems. Through an analysis of documented examples of partnerships at the local level it examines how Centrelink, the Commonwealth Service Delivery Agency, is using its considerable resources, human and physical, to work with others to improve accessibility of services, address service gaps and to actively create opportunities for participation. It proposes a tentative framework for understanding partnerships in terms of their value for 'customers' and the potential that such partnerships have to create opportunities that would not exist in a silo driven service delivery model. This article has relevance across all in human services who are interested in how the rhetoric of social partnerships translates into day to day service delivery.

In an environment of 'welfare reform' in Australia interest has developed in how social partnerships between government, the community sector and business can build community capacity (Edwards 2000:78-88; Head 1999:1-3; Rosalky 2000:51; Vardon 2002). The idea of a new paradigm of participatory governance which changes the way the public and community sectors relate to each other has generated excitement, but it is not without its critics who ask the question: is government really capable of partnering with anyone? They point to a lack of trust across the sectors especially the community sector's distrust of the motives of government. They express concern that government will have difficulty becoming facilitators rather than deliverers, participators rather than conductors (Edwards 2001:85; Queensland COSS 1998; Lyons 2000).

Nevertheless there are a number of new policy initiatives at the local, state and federal levels that lay claim to cross-sectoral partnerships as a way of addressing the problems of joblessness, welfare dependency and social exclusion. However, the way in which

governments actually use their considerable human, financial and technical resources to stimulate jobs, improve skills and training, renew physical environments and enhance social relationships is not well documented.

This article explores how one government service delivery agency, the *Commonwealth Service Delivery Agency* (Centrelink), is moving into new kinds of relationships or 'social partnerships' with other sectors to address barriers to employment and other social problems. Through an analysis of documented examples of partnerships provided by the customer service network of Centrelink agencies throughout Australia it discusses how Centrelink is engaged in a significant reshaping and extension of its strong income transfer customer service culture. This reshaping involves a greater focus on partnerships to address needs and to build the capability of individuals and their communities, particularly where there are significant barriers to social and economic participation. The article proposes a tentative framework for understanding these relationships in terms of their value for

customers and the potential that such relationships have for the creation of opportunities to assist people along a pathway to social and economic participation.

It is a change in approach that recognises most human wellbeing is strongly associated with the creative and organised efforts of people and services together rather than with the 'silo' or 'stovepipe' approach, which frequently dominates human service delivery.

Over the past thirty years the social security policy emphasis in Australia and other OECD nations has shifted in response to the impact of globalisation on labour markets, increasing levels of dependency on income support and changing social demographics (Giddens 2001). According to research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies there has been a five-fold increase in people receiving income support payments in Australia since 1965. More than 18% of working age people are receiving income support compared to 3% in the early and mid 1960s (Saunders 2000). During the 1990s the labour market was further polarised by growth in jobs almost entirely in either part time employment for low skilled low paid work or full time employment for high skilled high paid work (McClelland 2003:213). Between 1988 and 2002 the total employment of casual workers in Australia increased by 87.4% (141.6% for men and 56.8% for women). The number of casual workers comprised 27.3% in August 2002, a rise of 7% on the previous decade (ABS 2003:xviii).

From the mid 1980s onwards concerns about the effects of long term joblessness led to a shift in the policy emphasis from a focus on "passive" income support measures towards a more "active" approach to participation (Cass 1988; Shaver 2001:281). The new policy direction would 'require those in need of assistance to take an active part in measures to rectify their current disadvantage, and require government to join with them in supporting such efforts' (Shaver 2001:281). The Cass Review (1986-88) marked a change in the way unemployment assistance was delivered in Australia. The social security system was restructured to include a wide range of education and assistance programs

to facilitate work re-entry and financial incentives to increase participation. During the 1990s, Australia like other OECD countries experienced major social and economic upheaval, which further accelerated this change.

In 1999 the federal government set up a reference group to consider fundamental changes to the social security system in Australia. The increasing trend towards 'job rich and job poor households and communities' was a major theme of the *Report of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform, 'Participation Support for a More Equitable Society'* which was launched in August 2000 (RGWR,2000). The Reference Group identified the growing divide between these groups pointing out that there are now 860,000 children living on a day to day basis in households where no one is employed (RGWR 2000:79).

It asserted that the nation's social support system ultimately must be judged by its capacity to help people participate economically and socially as well as by the adequacy of its income support arrangements.

The *Australians Working Together* legislation, which resulted from the report, required a wider group of income recipients to participate in approved social, vocational and economic activities if they are to continue to be eligible to receive income support. In recognition that many in these groups are both socially and economically disadvantaged, a key issue for welfare reform was therefore to ensure that increased opportunities for social and economic participation were made available to complement these changes. One of the central questions asked in the *Final Report of the Reference Group on Welfare Reform 2000*, is 'How can more opportunities for economic and social participation be created for people receiving income support, especially those living in disadvantaged regions?'

The report identified a number of features of the reform to address this question including 'social partnerships' between government, the community sector and business as a key strategy for building community capacity to increase opportunities for social and economic participation.

Social capital and building community capacity

Community capacity has been defined as the 'capabilities that exist within communities... that strengthen individual and community capacity to define their own values and priorities and to act on these' (Healy and Hampshire, 2001:2). Caveye describes it as the 'ability of local people to anticipate change, reframe problems, mobilise their community, communicate widely, think strategically and make informed decisions'. The essence of community capacity is the ability, organisation, and attitudes, skills and resources that communities have to improve their economic and social situation (Caveye 1999:1).

The intense interest in social capital and community capacity building in recent years is in part generated by research which demonstrates that communities high in social capital are also the most effective economically (Putnam in Kenny 1999:64) and perform better on a wide range of outcome variables such as crime, delinquency, substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, school leaving age, unemployment etc, (Farrington 1997; Garbarino and Sherman 1980).

Interest has turned to how cross sectoral partnerships which address the 'joined up' nature of problems experienced by disadvantaged communities can create social capital and community capacity. A strong view espoused in various studies is that such partnerships, with their 'bottom-up' creativity and insights, can create pathways from exclusion to social and economic wellbeing and at the same time can 'lead the way in a modernising process which still preserves the best values of the welfare state' (Waite 2002). The Australian literature, however, has focused to date on how small scale partnerships between the community sector and business make a significant economic and social contribution to the transformation of welfare systems, employment creation, social cohesion, local development and evolution of the third sector as a whole. Little attention has been given to the role of government service deliverers in this analysis.

This paper discusses the way in which the

Commonwealth Service Delivery Agency is developing various forms of partnerships 'on the ground.' It explores a tentative model emerging from a study of documented local partnerships involving Centrelink customer service centres and their local communities that potentially has wider relevance for other government human service agencies.

Centrelink in local communities

Centrelink was launched in 1997 as the new statutory authority to serve as the Commonwealth's 'shop front' for many government departments. As an initiative of government it separated the policy and service delivery arms of the former Department of Social Security and parts of the Department of Employment, Education and Training. Policy remained with the Departments, which were subsequently renamed, and the service delivery arms were shaped into a *One Stop Shop* or service integration concept, which became Centrelink.¹

The creation of Centrelink required a significant merging and shaping of culture and the development of an identity that would be recognised and acceptable within the Australian community. In the 2002-2003 financial year Centrelink delivered 70 products and services and paid more than \$55 billion in Commonwealth payments on behalf of 26 client agencies. In the Annual Report the chief executive wrote:

While in the past Centrelink's role has mainly focused on providing income support, increasingly our role will change to one of helping customers to engage more productively with their communities, especially through the labour market...To do this we will need to build stronger relationships and work more closely with the business and community sectors...Centrelink cannot afford to be isolated from... the communities in which we work and we need to be more active in ensuring that all parties involved in assisting individuals or families, whether they are in the Commonwealth, State or non-government sectors, collaborate effectively (Annual Report 2002-2003: Ch1) .

While it is the payments of benefits to people at

various stages in their lives that most people associate with Centrelink the focus of this paper is on how Centrelink is endeavouring to build on the opportunities it encounters in the normal course of its business to combine its strength and expertise with others so that complex interrelated issues affecting people who seek income support can be addressed in different ways.

Working with local communities is not a new role for Centrelink. Linking people to services that are available in the community is part of normal business for local Centrelink staff. It is understanding the complexity of the external environment and working alongside other human service providers to actively create opportunities that are the significant changes in the way the organisation is responding to the new social policy environment.

Partnering the 800 pound gorilla

While Centrelink is often perceived to be a big organisation (some have called it ‘the 800 pound gorilla’) to many community service providers it is a small familiar office in their local community. There are many such

community or government agencies that also seek to improve the life opportunities of the same group of people Centrelink knows as its customers, especially those who are isolated as a result of social and economic disadvantage. In conducting a study of documented partnerships throughout the Centrelink network of local service delivery agencies a heuristic model was developed to further explore the nature of activities undertaken with external agencies and local community groups. The purpose of the heuristic model was to provide a framework for staff so that community engagement activities could become more focussed on assisting the customer along a pathway to participation.² The framework involves a number of concepts towards the ultimate goal of creating these opportunities. Every level is important and each has a different overall purpose:

The first level involves the key concept of *Communicating with other community groups and services* for the specific purpose of better understanding issues confronting the customer and the profile of the local communities which support them.

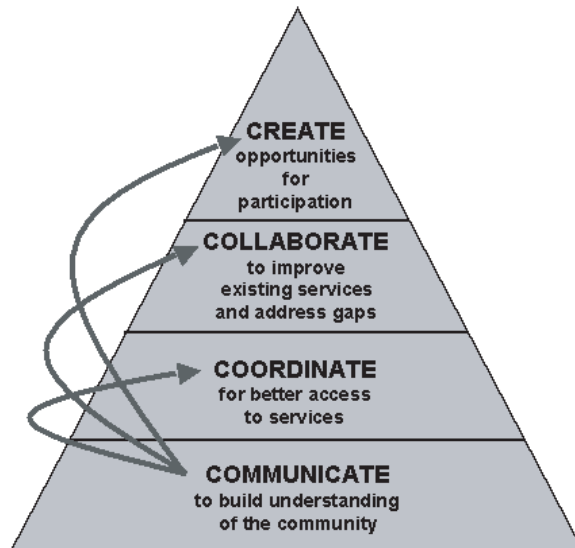


Fig 1: Building relationships at the local level

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The second level involves *Coordinating work with other providers* to make existing services more accessible to shared customers/clients.

Building on the work of these first two levels Centrelink and others, at the third level, are better able to *collaborate* to modify *existing* services to address gaps and to ensure that there are not unintended negative consequences of *existing* services.

At the fourth level Centrelink develops social partnerships with others to *create* new opportunities which assist people along a pathway to social and economic participation.

I will briefly discuss the first three concepts in the model and then concentrate on the apex of the triangle in Figure 1: 'creating opportunities for participation'. This is the area of activity that represents significant new ground for Centrelink and also best demonstrates the capacity of large government organisations to share resources and build community capacity.

'Communication' and establishing relationships with people who understand the community

A document analysis of work currently undertaken with local communities indicates that to create the relationships, which form the basis of partnerships, staff first seek out the advice of those who understand local customers and the issues they confront. This goes beyond the technical mapping of local demographics; it means strategically targeting community groups, and state and local governments who have long established funding relationships with these services. Through establishing these relationships Centrelink can better understand the participation barriers faced by customers and the potential in community groups to help address these barriers.

'Coordination' to make existing services more accessible

The everyday working relationships between people in Centrelink offices and people who work with the same group of customers or clients in other agencies lead to

coordinated initiatives for the purposes of making services by both, or all agencies, more accessible for shared customers/clients. This is done by:

co-locating services (for example: tenancy support officers, youth workers, family support agencies visiting Centrelink offices on regular days)

outsourcing customers within state government and community organizations 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 and distribution of service information

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 organization of income support, temporary housing and cultural support to streamline contact for homeless migrants upon arrival in Australia

These relationships, which focus on coordination, form the basis for more complex partnerships because they inform potential partners about the capacity of government and community providers to work together and are vital to establishing credibility.

Collaboration to improve existing services and address service gaps.

Collaborative partnerships are formed to work on significant system wide problems faced by shared customers, by improving the effectiveness of existing services and 'plugging' gaps in existing services. They also actively work to reduce the likelihood of unintended negative consequences of policies

such as breaching or debt creation for customers. They involve pooling information, time and resources to create more responsive ways of delivering services. The following are examples of collaborative partnerships.

Group program for young offenders – Western Sydney

In Western Sydney Centrelink works closely with other services to design and deliver a ten-week group work program for young offenders. The program aims to assist young men to access information and support and to reduce reoffending.

Koori Court pilot program

The Koori Court pilot program in Victoria aims to reduce the over representation of Indigenous people in the Justice system by allowing greater involvement of Koori elders or respected persons in assisting the Magistrate to determine what the most appropriate sentence may be. The role of Centrelink in this pilot at Shepparton and Broadmeadows in Victoria is to provide a presence on court days, coordinate appropriate referrals and maintain community relationships via the Indigenous Service Officer and other specialist staff. To get to this point it was necessary for service providers including Centrelink to identify the issues facing Indigenous offenders and to collaborate to produce a service response that is better than what each could have provided separately.

Indigenous Servicing: Centrelink and Tangentyere Council- Northern Territory

The banking and weekly payments trial which involved Centrelink developing partnerships with key agencies, including FaCS, Tangentyere Council in Alice Springs, ATSIC and the Westpac Bank was developed to assist indigenous Australians address an issue commonly referred to as the 'feast and famine' cycle. It worked by transferring customers from cheque to direct credit and through weekly rather than fortnightly payments. The trial involved 18 indigenous town camps surrounding Alice Springs. Changes to the Council's food voucher system enable people to elect to have a portion of their entitlement paid by Centrelink into a trust account operated by the Council; Cheques made payable to the

local supermarket can be drawn against the trust account.

Partnerships to actively create opportunities for participation: Centrelink's 'enabling' role.

The foundation of this heuristic model is therefore the development of relationships with other groups and individuals in the community so that Centrelink can better understand who they are and what they offer shared customers. Relationships developed as a result of this 'better understanding' lead to shared initiatives to improve the accessibility of service delivery for mutual customers or clients and then to collaborative efforts to address service gaps. While these are important stages in the development of effective partnerships, the experience of some Centrelink offices demonstrates that it is possible for partnerships to go further than this. What is unfolding are initiatives which move beyond the existing service system, to create, together with other groups, new opportunities for participation.

Partnerships at the so-called 'creative level' involve more broad ranging strategies to address emerging community issues, sometimes in response to a crisis (such as the closure of a major industry or a natural disaster) or other developing social problems. The most successful partnerships engage people all over the community (eg: local clubs, welfare services, churches, business, health etc) not only traditional welfare services. They are based on the principle that many different groups have a shared commitment to and investment in responding to issues, which affect their community.

While the other forms of relationship building and partnerships are integral to building opportunities for participation and form part of Centrelink's core business, actively creating opportunities for participation is a relatively new direction for Centrelink. It requires thinking through on all levels, how the organisation can be equipped for what is substantially a more complex and skilful, collaborative role. It requires new ways of thinking about the integral role that other sectors can play in this, including state and local government services (for example, corrective services, child protection services and mental

health); a wide range of services provided by the community sector (for example, child and family support programs and programs for young people at risk of early school leaving); and small, local community groups (for example: church congregations, service clubs). It clearly involves thinking beyond the current highly prescribed referrals to Commonwealth funded providers of employment services.

Central to a discussion of how Centrelink can play an enabling role with local communities is recognition of the assets that are held within Centrelink and what it can make available to this vast network of agencies and groups. With its extensive geographical spread across the country it is in a unique position to share its resources including human resources, data, professional and specialist skills, information technology tools and buildings and other facilities to create these opportunities.

The most obvious way in which resources can be shared is the use of physical sites and technology. Less obvious is the capacity that Centrelink has to share the skills and expertise of 27,000 staff, its considerable training capability and the extensive information it holds about local social and demographic data. The following are some examples of how this is happening in Centrelink.

Supporting Multicultural Settlement in the Goulbourn Valley - Victoria

With over 2,500 Arabic speaking people, predominantly from Iraq, resettling in the Goulbourn Valley Area in Victoria over the past few years, local government and non government service providers were presented with significant challenges. The needs of the settling community and the related demands on local housing, education, health, employment, income support and other services required an immediate response.

The formation of a taskforce convened by the local Centrelink office provided a forum for service providers to raise issues and share information with different levels of government. The taskforce included parliamentary representation and members from federal, state and local government agencies. It focused on immediate needs and highlighted the lack of preparedness by the local and regional communities in dealing effectively with the newly arrived migrant and refugee

communities.

In February 2000, Centrelink funded the *Building Links* project to not only deal with immediate issues but to also ensure a long term focus on service delivery to meet local needs. Consultants were engaged to manage the community development action based research project with the assistance of a local Community Reference Group. This group included the Manager and Multicultural Service Officer from Shepparton Centrelink Customer Service Centre along with representatives from other key government and community agencies. It addressed seven key areas as essential to successful settlement planning - communication; cultural awareness; income, employment and education; accommodation; health, community and welfare; citizenship and participation; social, religious and recreational life.

The project provided a connection between the various stakeholders and established a mechanism for coordinated service planning and implementation. Some of the direct outcomes include:

Plans for the development of an integrated settlement committee.

Recruitment of bilingual workers in a number of agencies.

NAATI training courses being run by the Tafe to provide qualified interpreters.

Establishment of a Unit in the Victorian School of Languages.

Substantial funding for a relevant Mental Health project in Cobram.

A local government health plan which specifically addresses the needs of the Arabic speaking community.

Funding for a torture and trauma worker in the region.

A Community Jobs Program for 20 Arabic speaking young people.

The 'intangible' benefits of the *Building Links* project were clearly evident following the 'September 11th' bombing. A core of key

agencies quickly formed to assess the situation and plan responses. Several multicultural and interdenominational religious services were organised as well as positive media stories released. No racially based disturbances were notified to police and Arabic speaking people from Brisbane and Adelaide came to Shepparton as it was considered a safe place to be.

Beenleigh Families Information Centre (Queensland)

At the Beenleigh Family Assistance Office in Queensland a Families Information Centre has been launched as a result of a close working relationship between the Centrelink Office and a local community agency, Regional Extended Family Services. The Centrelink Office is an ideal access point for the provision of resources and programs to enhance parenting skills and make referrals to early intervention programs. Centrelink social workers and REFS staff recruit and train and supervise the volunteers (including final placement Welfare Certificate students) to assist and support visiting parents. The centre also provides networking opportunities for parents with each other.

Creating retail opportunities for young people-Cheltenham Victoria

Centrelink, with others, has facilitated and enabled the creation of social and economic opportunities for young people, which have made a significant difference to their ability to participate in an ongoing way. Southern Family Life in Cheltenham Victoria attracted some state government funding to help seriously marginalised young people obtain vocational education and work experience. Southern Family Life, Centrelink the local council and the TAFE developed a vision to take this a step further by creating a shopfront for recycled designer clothes, three doors up from the Centrelink Office, so that after the young people obtained a retail certificate from TAFE they could set up and run the shop. Centrelink's main contribution to this shared venture was to provide the venue for the TAFE training. With the young people situated in their venue they were better able to provide a more personalised service and to make sure nothing went wrong with payments. The enthusiasm of Centrelink

staff to be involved with the venture and to provide clothing to the shop has grown now to the point that a roster for donations has had to be developed by the area office. The shop made a profit, became completely self supporting and ceased relying on government funding.

The Docklands Development Project- Windsor Victoria

This project began when the manager of the Windsor (Victoria) Office was invited to attend a visioning workshop at the site of the new Docklands development project, by the Hornery Institute (a philanthropic offshoot of Lendlease). This gathering of interested stakeholders has resulted in plans for a 'Learning and Employment Hub' involving Centrelink, the local TAFE, several community sector organisations and an employment agency. While this can be seen, at least initially as a way of connecting employers with a retail, hospitality and construction workforce, from Centrelink's perspective it is also about connecting the disadvantaged with other networks which can facilitate opportunities. The partners in this venture saw Centrelink as a major gateway for this group and were keen to let new opportunities unfold through the partnership.

The Parramatta 'Women in Transition' Program

A collaborative working relationship between the Parramatta Customer Service Centre and other government and non-government sector agencies to address issues confronting families culminated in 60 community members from over 45 organisations meeting quarterly at the Centrelink Office under the name of 'Parramatta Action Group for Families'.

One example of a cross-sectoral partnership instigated by the *Action Group for Families* is the *Women in Transition (WIT)* program. The program was designed to assist very isolated migrant women in the Parramatta area who are neither ready nor able to access employment, either through the Commonwealth funded Job Network or Personal Support Programs. Most of the women had little or no employment history in Australia, significant language barriers, settlement issues, domestic problems and a lack of personal networks. Finding ways to assist the women along a pathway to

participation was challenging, but, as the Centrelink manager remarked 'collectively we were able to do this. We had the knowledge, the skills and the access between us'³.

After months of knocking on the doors of businesses large and small, to seek sponsors for the project, TAFE offered to provide funding of \$1500. Another agency paid the fares for the women to travel to the venue. The venue itself was provided free of charge and another project partner funded childcare at the venue. The weekly schedule involved an hour of craft activity (making health and beauty products), followed by an information session. During the session the participants were provided with information from guest speakers on a range of topics aimed at improving their knowledge of what was available in their local communities, including opportunities to connect with vocational and employment services.

The program was approved by TAFE and the participants were presented with TAFE certificates, which will provide credit towards further TAFE studies for those interested in furthering their education. To date, 25 women have taken part in two *Women in Transition* Groups. The progress of the participants is encouraging. One is now undertaking an English course at TAFE after living in Australia and caring for her family for more than 30 years. A group of five Sudanese women who speak limited English are pursuing further English courses and a 'Work Opportunities Course for Women'. Three other participants are undertaking part-time study, while one has started voluntary work. Another is pursuing a hairdressing apprenticeship. A further six are actively working to stabilise their life situations. One is very keen to use the new skills to work from home making health and beauty products. One is still living at a women's refuge and professional counselling is supporting two others as they endeavour to manage the violent domestic situations in which they live. Although employment is not an option yet for most of these women, they are now linked to several new networks, which, it is envisaged, will continue to provide them with support and opportunities in the future. The women have suggested that they know others who would benefit from more WIT groups and have expressed interest in meeting and encouraging participants by sharing their own

experiences. The women are keen to keep in touch with each other and one of the graduates from the first group has become a trainer for the second WIT program.

In Parramatta, the program continues with financial support from TAFE and Centrelink and its success has been such that several other organisations across Australia are now working towards running the program. Following the success of these groups the *Parramatta Action Group for Families* and women from the WIT program presented a conference in early in 2005 for other isolated women in the Parramatta region.

Centrelink's specific role in this creative venture included: facilitating and leading initial forums in a non competitive context to identify shared concerns; seeking clarification of government policy on some of the issues raised by community groups; assisting in the identification of women who might benefit from the program; providing counselling and other services for some of the participants during and after the program; sharing technical, physical and human resources with the group including the use of their buildings and the expertise of professional, multicultural and other specialist staff.

Creating opportunities in the Harvesting Industry – Tasmania

Two and a half years ago employers and the Tasmanian state government raised concerns about the impact that Centrelink's administrative requirements were having on the availability of casual employees for the harvesting industries. Centrelink worked closely with state government and the industries to identify problems and to better tailor services to meet the needs of both the unemployed and the affected industries. Relationships were developed at managerial and then operational levels to sort through the difficulties that occurred as a result of existing processes.

Centrelink and their industry partners conducted trials to better tailor services at the Pipers Brook Vineyard and the Harvest Moon Vegetable Cooperative. The trials were successful in reducing the amount of paperwork. Streamlined arrangements enabled the employers to maintain staffing levels, which ensured crops were picked on time. Centrelink

has conducted a series of industry-based seminars and as result around 60 businesses in the hop, berry and apple industries have taken up the offer to broker these new arrangements with casual labourers.

Centrelink is now working with the three largest wineries in Tasmania. They have doubled their workforce since the trials and now almost entirely employ people who were formerly unemployed, many of whom came from significantly disadvantaged circumstances. More recently Centrelink began to work with the soon to be reopened scallop industry to ensure they have sufficient 'splitters' to process their catch.

Organisational challenges

The development of a conceptual framework to ensure that the community engagement work undertaken by a government service delivery agency is consistent with the organisation's strategic directions is an important first step, but insufficient on its own to ensure that agencies driven by legislation and other regulatory frameworks, can sustain a collaborative way of working. There are a number of significant strategic and operational challenges that need to be addressed if local initiatives are to be supported and sustained.

Centrelink is endeavouring to bring about major cultural and institutional changes to support its partnership capability at the local, regional and national levels. These include statements about new directions in strategic and business plans, a system of new incentives and rewards including key performance indicators for working together with local communities, and community partnership rewards for staff, the identification of staff champions and a communication and training strategy to ensure that staff are appropriately skilled and understand the clear link between community work and the policy objective (in this case, 'participation'). In recognition of the more complex operational issues associated with sharing its resources with 'communities', policy guidelines are being developed to address issues of critical importance such as: sharing premises, using volunteers, sponsorship, data sharing, legal and ethical issues associated with representation on community boards, and supporting local tenders.

Conclusion

The strong foundation of all partnerships involves the development of relationships. The public officials at the front lines of government service delivery agencies are uniquely positioned to build trust with local services and other community groups. These relationships are critical to understanding the experience of customers or clients and the barriers they face to 'participation', 'welfare to work', 'stronger families' and other policy outcomes. Relationships developed as a result of this 'better understanding' lead to shared initiatives to improve the accessibility of service delivery for mutual customers or clients and then to collaborative efforts to address service gaps. These are very important stages in the development of effective partnerships. However, the experience of people working 'on the ground' in government agencies demonstrates that it is possible for partnerships to go further than this; that together with other government and non government service providers and community groups they can assist in the creation of new opportunities for disadvantaged individuals and communities. To sustain this way of working, all human service agencies, including Centrelink, require strong organisational support at the national level, and a supportive policy framework, which also allows flexibility and innovation to flourish locally.

Centrelink is operating in an environment that increasingly requires more than the neutral delivery of government services. Social and economic pressures are transforming communities: urban, rural and regional. The vitality of these communities depends not only on their ability to maintain employment and income it also depends on 'the ability of local people to anticipate change, reframe problems, mobilise their community, communicate widely, think strategically and make informed decisions (Caveye 1999:1)'. This is the essence of community capacity, the 'ability, organisation, attitudes, skills and resources that communities have to improve their economic and social situation (Caveye 1999:1)'. The relationships that representatives of government build with members of local communities and the personal trust engendered by these

relationships are critical to this process. Some of the examples provided in this paper demonstrate the scope of local initiatives and what is possible in the future.

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Notes

- ¹ In December 2004 the re-elected coalition government rationalised six Commonwealth service delivery agencies, including Centrelink, into one large Department of Human Services. Also in a move to improve the 'responsiveness' of service delivery agencies 'to government policy directions and to raise service quality'.
- ² Centrelink's definition of 'participation', for the purposes of community engagement activities was 'all progress along a pathway to work outcomes including personal and skill development, training and volunteering' (Centrelink & Deloitte, 2003:9)
- ³ 'Us' refers to: Centrelink Parramatta; Granville Multicultural Community Centre; Granville TAFE Outreach; Baulkham Hills, Holroyd, Parramatta Migrant Resource Centre (MRC); Parramatta City Council; The Smith Family Parramatta; Immigrant Women's Speakout Association; Cumberland Women's Health; Parramatta Community Health Centre; Breast Screen Greater Western Sydney; Parramatta Business Enterprise Centre; Harris Park Community Centre.

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