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## Innovation in urban transformation: Community action planning in public housing estates in Sydney

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The past decade has witnessed the dawn of globalisation, which is not only considered as advantageous, but also an inevitable phenomenon by political and business leaders throughout the world. Irrespective of their size, location and economic status, countries around the world are influenced by the forces of globalisation and as a result, the cities of these countries are trapped in a whirlwind of constant change, which affects all forms of urban life. Sydney is the largest city in Australia and a city with a global significance. As a result of globalisation, dramatic changes are evident, both in its built form as well as its socio-economic structure. These changes are expected to bring benefits and prosperity to the inhabitants, although there is no consensus on whether the benefits arising from globalisation can bring prosperity to all of them.

Sydney is in a constant state of change. The individual is influenced, affected and transformed by these changes although often unaware of them in their true magnitude. Some may also see these changes as part of their day to day life in the mundane and routine struggle for survival in the city.

As individuals, people have very little control over the changes taking place in a city although they are a part and parcel of these changes. Irrespective of their socio-economic background they all have to constantly face new challenges and new opportunities. Some may have the capacity to face new challenges and the ability to harness new opportunities created by these changes. But most, if not all, public housing tenants have very limited capacity to face up to new challenges and capture the benefits of new opportunities. Although surrounded by changes, public housing tenants are mostly unconscious of them and routinely just struggling with the daily necessities of life. For public housing tenants this is reduced to dealing with numerous social, economic, health and community issues.

In the light of this newly emerging situation, the Central Sydney Division of the Department of Housing (hereinafter referred to as the Department) is looking at the communities living in public housing estates in Sydney afresh and rethinking ways to improve their lives. The objective is to give them a voice, remove obstacles that stop them using services such as education, health, training, leisure and sports and build

their capacity to face up to new realities in a rapidly changing world. The new approach adopted by the Department is a Community Action Planning model (hereinafter referred to as CAP) that is based on the partnership, participation and goodwill of all stakeholders in and around public housing communities.

During the last eighteen months the Department has laid the ground work for this process to take place in three public housing areas in Sydney. These areas are Glebe in the inner city, South Coogee in the eastern suburbs, and Menai in Sutherland representing three types of urban milieu. It has devised partnerships between the Department and a number of tertiary education institutions, forged close relations with major stakeholders including community and private sectors, and established networks for a systematic integration through the CAP approach. The approach is seen as empowering residents of housing estates to take action on their own behalf, in a situation where 'top down' decision making has long been characteristic of the relationship between government and tenants.

## **COMMUNITY ACTION PLANNING MODEL**

The overall objective of the CAP model is to transform public housing estates into independent and powerful communities. To build their capacity to an adequate level so that they can access services available to other citizens which are ordinarily taken for granted. For their children to be able to use the resources available to others such as educational and vocational facilities. So that they will be able to go to school, to Universities, TAFE colleges and take up apprenticeships.

The CAP method incorporates mechanisms to engage all stakeholders in its process. It is a process where all stakeholders are given the opportunity to participate as equal partners, and to take ownership of the actions developed. Through this process, all stakeholders are expected to fulfil both their own responsibilities within their own field of influence, and work in alliance or partnership with other players functioning in their fields of influence.

Some of the problems faced by residents of these areas are associated with a long history of deception and unfulfilled commitments, producing indifference and disillusionment. Planning has the potential to give people hope but can also

disappoint when results fall well short of expectations. The relationships between state agencies and residents can be sour, accumulated and compounded due to unsatisfactory client service for long periods. People want quick and noticeable results. But, for most of the problems they face, expecting quick fixes is not realistic.

## **CONQUERING ISSUES WITH THE HELP OF THE PARTNERS**

The Universities of Sydney and New South Wales have been assisting in the Plan making exercise as a part of their ongoing partnership with the Department of Housing. Students and staff have worked on the project as part of their degree studies. Students conducted surveys of tenants, safety audits, physical investigations of the sites and research studies, to discover physical and social issues impacting upon the residents of the estates.

## **REFERENCE GROUP**

All three projects have Reference Groups to monitor the progress of the projects, comprised of representatives from relevant sections of the Department, and all other partners of the project. They represent the tenant community, Local Council, the Police, Department of Juvenile Justice, Department of Community Services and the Universities. Reference Groups meet regularly to discuss the progress of the project (*See Attachment 1: Terms of reference of the SCAP Reference Group*).

## **CAP PROCESS AND SOUTH COOGEE, GLEBE AND MENAI PROJECTS**

### **Phases of the CAP**

The Department's CAP model contains three phases. The first Phase is the most intensive of all, during which time most of the ground work is carried out. It is envisaged that the intensity of the work would play a key role in building up the momentum, create an adequate amount of activities to gain attention, generate enthusiasm and make an impact on the community and the stakeholders.

The first phase is composed of the "Meaning of Home" study, the tenant survey, tenants workshops and the establishment of the Reference Group. The second phase of the project is dependant upon the effectiveness of the first phase in terms of the work that has been achieved. By the end of the first phase it is envisaged that material for the draft action plan is ready. If it is ready, the second phase will be to workshop the Action Plan in detail with tenant representatives and other stakeholders. It can also be the members of the Reference group taking the lead and formulating a number of focus groups based on groups of issues. Each focus group then deliberates issues and actions and reports back to the Reference Group. It is during the third phase that the plan becomes a complete document. Third phase continues into the future finalising the actions, conducting expert studies, searching for resources, negotiating with various other stakeholders, whilst implementing, changing and adjusting the actions proposed in the plan. The CAP process will continue while some projects and programs emanating from the CAP may have their own lives.

The CAP process produces a range of reports and records. However, the main plan is a matrix consisting of issues, actions, responsibility for each action and a time frame. It is a simple document which can be easily understood by all involved. The idea is to give tenants ownership by getting them involved, giving them responsibility for actions and a role in maintaining accountability for the actions in the plan, by having a personal copy of the plan and being part of the Reference Group. Since they are given every opportunity to participate as equal partners in the process by the end of the first phase, they will have achieved a degree of empowerment and a feeling of confidence. They will also have developed mutual understanding and a reasonably good working relationship with stakeholders who are supposed to deliver some of the actions. This helps to continue the process and sustain the achievements.

The aim is to transform the public housing community from a generic situation to a multitude of situations appropriate to each individual's circumstance. During the last 18 months, the Central Sydney Division has used the CAP model to place three public housing communities on the path of this transformation. These communities are South Coogee, Glebe and Menai, all on different stages of this path. In these areas, the issues are more social than technical. Unlike technical challenges, the

main resource required to address many of these issues is not financial but rather subtle trust-building leading to local ownership solutions.

In South Coogee public housing estate, which was the first public housing estate to undergo the CAP process, students from the University of Sydney conducted the "Meaning of Home" study amongst 16 tenants. In Glebe 21 tenants participated in the same exercise. In Menai, which is still in the early stages of the CAP process, "Meaning of Home" study is going to be undertaken during the first half of 2004.

In South Coogee, the students first had group tenant meetings to gain a background for the study. At group meetings, tenants had the purpose of the study explained to them and were given an option to participate in in depth interviews. A general discussion on their life in South Coogee and issues associated with their properties took place. At this meeting, four groups of issues were raised and discussed. These were:

1. property maintenance
2. aesthetics of the estate including rubbish removal, rubbish dumping, graffiti and open space
3. the lack of support/communication for elderly residents
4. safety and security.

Equipped with this basic information on issues faced by tenants, students had further meetings with individual tenants in their homes. These interviews were conducted as general discussions rather than question and answer sessions. After talking to about 12 tenants the students managed to establish useful background information to set up the project. All tenants interviewed told students that their residence is their home not just a shelter. Public ownership has enabled them to feel "at home" because of the guaranteed tenure they have. They can enjoy their homes without being fearful of eviction. They did not intend to apply for transfers or move out and expressed sentiments such as; "I could not survive", "where else would I go?" or "I would not last long". Home for these tenants is based on neighbours and friends not just bricks and mortar. They value long term relationship with support networks and familiar transport networks. They also value companionships they have developed with neighbours and the natural beauty of the location (Schwarz, 2002:8-10).

In Glebe, where the Department commenced the CAP process earlier this year, students from the University of Sydney conducted the "Meaning of Home" study during a two months period. The first interaction of students with tenants happened at a tenant meeting. After this meeting, where tenants and students had the opportunity to share information and learn from each other, the interviews on a one to one basis were conducted individually in their own homes.

Tenants in Glebe described various elements of their homes which affect the meaning of home. There is a clear relationship between the meaning of home and their garden space and maintenance of the home. They complained about poor client service that has caused a negative impact on their well being. Lack of companionship or loneliness was another key area these tenants highlighted. However, most tenants had an attachment to their home and, with the sense of security of tenure, they have settled into their homes for the long term (Elson, 2003:3).

In Glebe, tenants expressed how important it is to be consulted about issues relating to their homes. If the Department makes decisions about the colour of the wall, bathroom tiles, or the kitchen floor without consulting the occupant, their meaning of home can be violated and destroyed (Perera, 2003).

The second workshop was held four weeks after the conclusion of the first workshop, to discuss different ways to deal with the problems identified in the first workshop and to develop ideas into strategic actions. The participants were provided with an outline of the issues in the form agreed to at the first workshop, according to a priority order, and some directions for seeking possible solutions to resolve these issues. The workshop was then broken up into sub-groups to identify alternative ways the issues could be addressed.

Sub-groups presented their proposals to the main group and through negotiation agreed on a summary list of actions and their order of priority. These agreed solutions were then added into the "Issues Matrix" which was taken away by the tenants and stakeholders for further consideration.

The Action Plan is inclusive of proposals for physical improvements along with other social, and health programmes. These schedules may include community

development, improvement of health, technical skills development, community contracts, education and training, garden development, street furniture, streetscape improvement, garbage removal, neighbourhood watch, youth groups, youth training such as computer centres, co-operative shop, setting up of a music group/s, etc.

### **Presentation of the Final Plan**

The second phase begins with the presentation of the final plan to the Reference Group, for consideration in detail, at several workshop sessions. At this stage it is expected that the Reference group is given adequate time to consider each issue, respective actions and schedules of implementation.

Since the Reference Group is made up of all partners, views and opinions of the partners who have responsibility for Actions can be discussed. Having had the opportunity to go through the consultative process and to consider Actions proposed in the Plan, the partners can suggest realistic time frames and advise on what Actions have already been undertaken or are in the process of being undertaken by their respective agency.

Following consideration by the Reference group the Plan will then formally be endorsed for implementation.

South Coogee CAP has been reviewed and endorsed by the Reference Group and is ready to be moved on to the third phase. Since the CAP process began in July 2002, South Coogee has gone through a transformation. They have two tenant groups which are very active in community development activities as well as participating in decision making related to the management of the estate. They have keen gardening groups and a number of local service providers are now running various programs for youth and women. The Graduate School of the Environment at Macquarie University prepared a waste management plan as recommended in the CAP and the Department and tenant groups are talking to Randwick council about changing garbage skips to wheely bins. Tenant groups are talking to the Roads and Traffic Authority to resolve traffic issues on Elphinstone Street. A number of Actions proposed in the plan have already been taken up with Council and other stakeholders.

Glebe CAP is still in its Second Phase. Although the series of workshop were held, issues in Glebe needed further consideration by focus groups. Focus groups were formed with individual members of the Glebe Reference Group taking the leadership in areas where they have interest and expertise. People who are not members of the Reference group but have expertise in particular issues were invited to be members of focus groups. Six groups were formed to cover Ageing and Disability, Youth and Crime, Indigenous Issues, Safety and Security, Families and Children and Tenant Participation. These focus groups met several times and the CAP in Glebe is being prepared for presentation to the Reference Group in January 2004.

### **Process Continues**

Even after finalisation of the plan, the process will continue. The process includes further consultation with the tenant community at different levels. Actions proposed in the Plan relevant to blocks or groups of houses will have to be elaborated and detailed for consideration by residents of each smaller area. Detailing of the proposed Actions may also require further studies and involvement of experts.

Community Action Planning is more about the development of processes rather than reaching a final outcome or outcomes; the processes that foster and facilitate the enhancing of aspirations of communities and building their capacity to meet such aspirations. It is incremental and responsive, with fewer boundaries and limitations. It helps communities by providing unlimited and unconstrained support for them to use their imagination to help themselves.

*The opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Housing.*