Shared Action
Stronger communities, safer children

Fiona Gardner

This article explores the effectiveness of an innovative and exciting project called 'Shared Action', a community development approach to child protection in Bendigo, Victoria. Shared Action was a three-year project which started in January 1997. It began by encouraging a sense of community ownership. A shared vision was developed with key goals leading to a wide range of community activities. A sense of hope and cooperation grew along with social networks, the capacity to resolve conflict constructively and a shared sense of community responsibility.

*Fiona Gardner, BA, Dip.Soc.Stud., MSc.
Coordinator, Social Work Department
La Trobe University, Bendigo Campus
PO Box 199, Bendigo, Vic 3552
Email: F.Gardner@bendigo.latrobe.edu.au*

How to ensure the safety and well being of children was the focus of Shared Action, a community development project in Long Gully, a suburb of Bendigo, Victoria. The project was auspiced by St. Luke's, a major human service agency in Bendigo with a particular interest in work with children and families, especially those families where children are at risk. The Ian Potter Foundation provided funding for three years and we, Bob Jamieson and I, were asked to participate by evaluating the project which began in January 1997.

BACKGROUND

The impetus for Shared Action came from concern about the need for a greater variety of responses to children and families at risk. There was a view within the Victorian welfare system consistent with that in other parts of the world that the approach to child protection had become so focused on protecting children at risk of serious abuse, that families were often unnecessarily involved in statutory intervention. Child maltreatment is a socially constructed issue, what we see as child abuse and how we talk about it varies depending on culture (Scott 1995; Garbarino & Eckenrode 1997). The importance of history and social context is also critical (Liddell 1993; Markiewicz 1996). The death of Daniel Valerio in Victoria in 1990 received considerable publicity and contributed to the growth of investigative protective services and what is now often perceived as 'too much' intervention. In Victoria mandatory reporting was introduced in 1992 after considerable debate about its effectiveness. Protective services grew out of proportion to the range of other services that make up the child and family welfare system. This led to what Scott suggests is a central question: 'what is the proper balance between prevention,

investigation and treatment services in a 'good enough' child welfare system?' (1995, p.85).

Recognition of the need for a range of services to support families and children has led to the development of a wide range of early intervention and family support programs mainly provided by voluntary agencies (Cole 1995; Hogue & Liddle 1999). Family preservation services have also proliferated, often with a focus on brief, intensive intervention, more successfully in some situations than others (Campbell 1997). There has been increasing interest in narrative and solution focused approaches (White 1997; de Shazer 1991).

These approaches generally recognise the importance of seeing the family in the context of its community. However, they still primarily retain a family focus rather than working with the community as a whole. Shared Action aimed to work primarily with the community, rather than with individual families, to support the safety and well-being of children. This approach is supported by a number of researchers (McKnight 1997; Coughy, O'Campo & Brodsky 1999, Garbarino & Eckenrode 1997, Brodksy, O'Campo & Aronson 1999, Hogue & Liddle 1999). Coughy, O'Campo and Brodsky (1999) reinforce the importance of neighbourhood and larger societal factors in the health and well being of communities. Their research suggests that positive individual and community outcomes on a range of health measures are connected to:

- a lower level of crime and higher perception of neighbourhood safety;

- community organisation and a positive sense of belonging to a community.

Garbarino and Barry (1997) identify four working assumptions from their research into neighbourhoods that are likely to be 'high-risk' in relation to child maltreatment. These include social and economic impoverishment and residential segregation that concentrates high-need, low-resource families resulting in a lack of positive role models, sharing and nurturing interaction (pp.59-60).

The literature strongly suggests that communities where people are actively involved in community life are likely to generate greater 'social capital' and to be more nurturing and safer for children (Cox,1995). This is more likely to happen where there are structures that enable people to participate and to develop trust through shared activities (Putnam 1993; Ife 1995; McArdle 1993; Slocum & Thomas-Slayter 1995). Literature on resilience confirms that children are more likely to be resilient if they are more connected within their communities (Resnick, Harris & Blum 1996; Benard 1996). However, communities vary and are not always a positive experience for their members (Cox, 1995, Brodsky, O'Campo & Aronson 1999). Kenny (1994) suggests that community is essentially a subjective notion, we define community as what we experience as community.

The Shared Action project was auspiced by St. Luke's which uses a strengths-focused, competency-based approach to working with individuals and families (Scott & O'Neil 1996). This and a narrative approach have been advocated by many writers (de Shazer 1991; White 1997; White & Denborough 1998) and many of the principles can be related to working in communities. De Shazer (1991), for example, talks about the importance of 'solution-focused stories' which are more likely to produce transformation than complaint focused stories (p.83). Using a strengths-based approach in Shared Action essentially meant focusing on the resources and capacities within the community rather than on its deficits. Chappelle (1999) points out that,

> Residents know their community's history and are well aware of the needs that exist. What they need acknowledged is 'the vast resource of the community itself ... Each community

resident has strengths: a lifetime of experiences, knowledge and acquired skills (p.22).

SHARED ACTION PROJECT

Shared Action was based primarily in Long Gully, a suburb of Bendigo, selected because data on income levels, housing, employment and child protection contacts suggest there were major issues of safety and well being for children. Long Gully initially was identified by both key informants and community members as a community with many difficulties. Comments from key informants talked about the lack of services. One said:

> ... neither (Long Gully or Eaglehawk) have got any of their own infrastructure. Neither of them have had any local investment or any nurturing or care from the outside world, from local government or anything like that put into them.

Community members, too, talked about the difficulties for them:

> Everyone in this community is in the same position, they're broke, they're not enjoying life, so we've all got to realise, we're all the same, get on with it, help each other. This is what we've got to instil in people's minds, they're aggressive because they're all doing it hard, but if they'd realise we're all in the same boat.

Several key informants also talked about the scale of issues people had to deal with in terms of social attitudes, long term unemployment, lack of income and stigma, suggesting that the 'basic issues are in society, it's not just Long Gully'.

In terms of Garbarino and Barry's (1997) identification of factors in high risk neigbourhoods, Long Gully clearly identified at the beginning of the project as a high risk area. Low income families were segregated into the Ministry of Housing estate. There were high levels of need and family crises which did inhibit sharing. Lack of opportunities for participation in community life inhibited confident interactions and contributed to the apparent lack of positive role models. From Garbarino and Barry's perspective, the question would be whether Long Gully had been able to

develop into a 'low risk' neighbourhood with a greater ability to seek and use help, more developed family and social networks and a different view of the community as a place to bring up children.

Over the three years of the project, Shared Action had the equivalent of two workers, a community development worker employed throughout the project and several other shorter term workers. The roles for the short term workers varied as the project developed: initially a receptionist/ administrative worker was employed, later a worker focusing on park development. The workers were based in the local community and started by meeting community members and finding interested volunteers. They also made contact with the two main primary schools who had children from the area. The initial focus of the project was to develop a shared vision. A series of discussions with community members in people's homes (Shared Action parties) and with teachers at the local schools led to two broad goals:

1. to enhance communication between parents, teachers and children by creating and using opportunities to build relationships;

2. to develop the physical environment of Long Gully to provide a social focal point, something to be proud of, a symbol of a healthy and safe community (Beilharz 1998).

These goals were used as the basis for developing a wide range of activities including:

*   developing a sport and recreation club, which generated many activities including a walking group, dance fun for young people, a netball team and family games days. An activity that provided a major focus for interest and community building was the establishment of an under 12 football team called the 'Long Gully Legends';

*   Live in Long Gully concert and fair which drew participants from across Bendigo and promoted the positive features of the neighbourhood;

*   park development: a group formed to negotiate with the local council

about the development of a playground and a park along the Long Gully Creek;

- a newsletter as a form of communication with the community and between community members;

- meetings with teachers from local primary schools at Long Gully and a literacy program.

EVALUATION METHODS

A variety of methods were used in evaluating Shared Action. We met monthly with the Project Coordinator and other workers to 'chronicle' what was happening, significant developments and changes. We also attended review meetings, task group meetings and some of the activities of the project. John Owen, from the Centre for Program Evaluation, provided valuable input on using such methods to establish the 'logic' of the project's processes.

We were also interested to know how people from inside and outside the community saw Shared Action and what they thought had worked. We interviewed a range of people who had had some kind of connection with the project and who represented different perspectives in the general community. Most people were suggested initially by the Shared Action staff, some of those interviewed suggested other people, and we knew some people from our own connections with the community. Some people were interviewed each year for three years, a larger group was interviewed towards the end of the project. A very diverse group of 24 was interviewed altogether. The group included a local government councillor, representatives of the human service agencies who had clients in Long Gully, including St. Luke's, policy makers in government departments, one of the police involved in Long Gully, a real estate agent and local business people.

As well as these people, who all had some kind of professional or business link to the Long Gully community and/or Shared Action, eight community members were interviewed. Views of both groups were generally consistent and very positive about Shared Action and the changes in the community. The views within each group also varied,

particularly in what changes they saw as most important. Both groups were asked similar questions in a semi-structured, taped interview. Results were collated, analysed and grouped according to themes which were then further refined.

We had also hoped to gain more specific quantitative data. We considered school based data from the two primary schools that had relatively high numbers of children from Long Gully. Two sources of data were considered: school records of suspensions, detentions, alternative lunch-time programs and unexplained absences, and small focus groups of children in years 1, 3 and 5. Unfortunately the data from these were inconclusive partly because of small numbers, variability in recording and selection. Data in relation to changes in child protection notifications were difficult to obtain and a method for doing so only became clear too late in the evaluation process.

There was a view within the Victorian welfare system ... that the approach to child protection had become so focused on protecting children at risk of serious abuse, that families were often unnecessarily involved in statutory intervention.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A significant degree of change has happened in the Long Gully community since Shared Action began. Community members describe a clearer sense of community, greater connectedness and a considerable variety of activities and avenues for participation. Key informants confirm the sense of difference within the community, identifying, for example, different attitudes to participation, development

of skills in community members and a changed perception of the community.

A framework for the consideration of the project was developed by Bob Jamieson from some of the literature relevant to the community development process (McMillan & Chavis 1986; Buckner 1988; Ife 1995). Generally, this literature linked safety and well being to people feeling connected to and able to influence their community. We used this framework to explore issues about Shared Action in Long Gully according to the following dimensions:

1. Embeddedness vs Isolation, ie, has Shared Action made a difference to how connected individuals are to the community? Do community members work together on common issues and feel able to participate in community life?

2. Influence vs Powerlessness, ie, do community members now feel more able to influence events and generate change both at individual and community levels?

3. Resourcing vs Impoverishment, ie, does the community feel better resourced? Do people now feel they have the knowledge and skills to seek resources?

4. Person - Environment Relationships, ie, do community members now feel more positive about their community? Are there more positive relationships between this community and the external environment?

Embeddedness/Isolation

One of the intangible aspects of developing community is how to develop a sense of belonging or 'embeddedness'; what Ife (1995) would talk about as a sense of identity with the community. Through Shared Action people felt they became more connected to the community; their sense of belonging to and identity with the community increased.

A critical part of this was the increase in opportunities for participation and particularly being able to participate in a variety of ways depending on current skills, time availability and interests. Secondly, in order to feel connected it appeared that people needed to be able

to participate in a way that made them feel valued. Activities enabled people to meet informally in non-threatening ways for a common purpose. Attending a community barbecue, for example, or a Shared Action 'party' were low key ways for people to make contact. The development of a shared vision, for example, encouraged those involved to concentrate on how they would like the community to be, rather than what the community might need to 'fix it up'. The process enabled community members to stand back from the community as it existed to explore what they saw as important in generating a safe community for them and their children.

A greater sense of embeddedness for some people also meant a feeling of ownership, of belonging to Long Gully. Many of those interviewed talked about a change in the 'feeling about the community', a greater sense of hope and possibility, a pride in the community that hadn't been there before. The football club was often talked about as an important aspect of this, symbolising the capacity of the community to work together effectively in forming and supporting a team of players.

Respect was an important aspect of enabling people to become connected. Respect was partly about valuing people, seeing each person as having something to contribute to the community. The idea of respectful relationships was explored in a variety of community meetings and activities. Respect was partly about acknowledging that people could disagree and be different and still work together effectively. One community member talked about coming to meetings and 'leaving negative feelings at the door'.

Influence/Powerlessness

A second important development in Long Gully was the feeling of community members that they could influence change. Feeling more empowered was frequently mentioned. This was particularly significant because many community members had previously felt powerless to make any change to their situation either personally or collectively. This sense of being able to influence change related to several areas:

- **Being able to develop activities and organisations**
For some people, the Shared Action structure allowed them to share in making something happen in the community in a way that they had not been able to do before. Sometimes this was in a specific task like asking for a donation from a local business or helping distribute the newsletter. At other times, it was being involved in discussions about what might be possible in the community. This helped generate a feeling of capacity, that individuals were capable and that together as a community, they would be able to make things happen.

The literature strongly suggests that communities where people are actively involved in community life are likely to generate greater 'social capital' and to be more nurturing and safer for children (Cox, 1995).

- **Being able to influence human service organisations**
This aspect of Shared Action provided possibilities for dialogue between community members and workers with the range of human service organisations involved in Long Gully. A worker organised a series of meetings between community members and members of human service organisations involved in Long Gully to give feedback about each organisation's approach and service provision. The positive responses from human service organisations developed a sense of mutual respect that confirmed the community's feeling of influence.

- **Emphasizing community decision making**
The Shared Action approach consistently referred decisions back to the community and its specific

groups. The Sport and Recreation Club, for example, became a significant point for decision making. The Football Club as a sub-committee took on responsibility for ensuring that the football team would be able to play each week adequately supported by parents which required a considerable degree of organisation.

- **The capacity to deal with conflict**
Simply having some activities meant that conflict had to be dealt with. The young women interested in a dance group, for example, had parents in conflict who didn't want their daughters to be in the same group. Negotiating this and resolving their differences provided an important model for the young women as well as more positive connections for the parents. It also demonstrated to the people involved and the community generally that you could change relationships with others.

Key informants and community members gave examples of people learning to deal with conflict. Some suggested that community members were more aware of learning from each other, watching to see how each other dealt with children, for example. Others pointed out that as adults learnt to deal better with conflict in meetings, they were better models for their children. One gave an example of applying the same strategies she had learnt about in a volunteer course to resolving an issue with her teenage son.

One of the remaining dilemmas for Shared Action – or for the Long Gully community – was how to involve people who continued to be isolated. This was particularly an issue around people who were disrupting community activities in some way. Part of being respectful was accepting that not everyone would want to participate in community life. However, towards the end of the project there were some newer community members who threatened the increased sense of community well being by being violent to property or individuals. The community met to consider what to do about this and decided to ask for police support initially. This demonstrates a

significant step in feeling able to ask for organisational support.

Resourcing/Impoverishment

Long Gully had traditionally been seen as an impoverished community and many of its members had internalised this view. An important aspect of Shared Action was to work on acknowledging the existing strengths and resources of individuals and the community of Long Gully. Having a set of structures through which people could participate was important. Shared Action workers established early in the project that people wanted to be involved in their community. The difficulty was to see how. Shared Action helped provide a vehicle through which participation became possible. Some people became involved in 'just about everything'. People who weren't confident initially had started in low key ways, then took on greater challenges when they felt ready.

Developing skills and knowledge was an important part of increasing community resources. Some people did this informally, learning as they went from participating in fund raising, committee meetings or organising an activity. Funding was found for some people to attend formal courses, for example in leadership, coaching and first aid. For many people, this formal or informal learning led to a considerable increase in less tangible resources like confidence. For some this led to an increased sense of power in their own lives, feeling more confident to negotiate with organisations for services, for example, or to visit the school to talk about their children.

Being able to obtain concrete resources for the community was an important demonstration of community strengths. The play equipment in the park in Long Gully had been removed some years before and the community felt their attempts to get more equipment had been unsuccessful. During the project students, teachers, residents and council participated in designing, creating and maintaining a park which is now seen as a resource with multiple uses: a safe place for children to play, a place where families can have barbecues, a meeting place for community members.

Bringing resources to the community is also demonstrated through community

activities. The Long Gully Live concerts have now been held each year with over a thousand people attending the most recent one. The football club, the netball club, the dance group, discos for children, and the walking group are all visible signs of the community's resources. The number of people going to watch football matches – up to 200 at some games – is another visible demonstration of community. These concrete and regular signs of community activity reinforce the existence of the community and the connections of individuals within it.

A sense of hope and shared possibilities has developed in Long Gully from the Shared Action project. ... It was clear from the community and its key workers that children were living in a safer and more nurturing environment with a strengthened community life.

The development of social networks is another community resource that also supports embeddedness. People interviewed for the evaluation told stories of the change in their sense of networks in the community. Many felt they had developed close friendships as a result of Shared Action activities which meant that they could call on each other for help with children. They gave examples where people had provided significant support so that children could remain in the community or where the stress for families was reduced.

The Shared Action workers with their skills and knowledge were also a resource for the community. The workers were greatly appreciated as a resource, particularly their ability to demonstrate how things could be done. Workers provided 'coaching' and encouragement to individuals and to

groups. Their capacity to understand how difficult life could be for community members was an important aspect of their acceptance. Such validation was often a first step for people in starting to consider what they could do and what they could learn.

Person – Environment Relationships

One of the benefits of Shared Action activities was the amount of positive publicity for Long Gully. For people living in Long Gully, or those involved with the community, their own negative perception changed. They knew that there was a different feeling about Long Gully, a greater sense of hope and pride. Some of the local organisations and businesses also felt there was a major change in attitude, that people were taking an active interest in their community. Community members were out talking to local businesses, for example, explaining about the Shared Action project and requesting donations to help with activities. Businesses responded, generally positively, and supported many activities by donating goods or prizes.

The football club itself was an important aspect of seeking positive relationships with the environment. In a sense it was a visible sign of the Long Gully community positively engaging with the wider community of Bendigo. Managing the team well demonstrated to the wider community that Long Gully was capable. Feedback from the other teams, schools and key informants was very positive about this.

Relationships with voluntary and government organisations also changed markedly. Representatives from the voluntary organisations often remarked how impressed they were with the community's ability to articulate their views and to act upon them. Individuals also became more able to use voluntary and government organisations more effectively. One emergency relief organisation commented that fewer people from Long Gully were making contact and suggested that people's needs were possibly being met within the community to a greater degree.

Relationships with schools were also significant. Previously, many community members were reluctant to interact with schools, remembering

their own negative experiences. Shared Action worked with the two main primary schools with children from Long Gully to encourage more connections. One school provided literacy classes within the community and teachers visited the community to meet parents. In this school particularly, parents became much more confident about visiting the school and making contact with teachers.

CONCLUSIONS

A sense of hope and shared possibilities has developed in Long Gully from the Shared Action project. At the end of the three years of the project, the community had changed significantly. A greater sense of embeddedness had grown between individuals, structures enabling participation had been established, and the community members were able to exert their influence. The community's resources had been acknowledged and new resources, skills, confidence, networks, activities and facilities developed. Community members had a greater acceptance of difference and more ability to resolve conflict constructively. For both adults and children these changes generated a greater sense of safety and well being in their community. It was clear from the Long Gully community and its key workers that children were living in a safer and more nurturing environment with a strengthened community life. ◆

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION ABOUT SHARED ACTION, CONTACT LINDA BEILHARZ l.beilharz@stlukes.org.au

REFERENCES

Beilharz, L. (1998) *Shared Action: Mid Term Review*, St. Luke's Anglicare.

Benard, B (1996) *From Research to Practice: The Foundations of the Resiliency Paradigm in Resiliency in Action*, Winter.

Brodsky, A.E., O'Campo, P.J. & Aronson, R.E. (1999) 'PSOC in community context: Multi-level correlates of a measure of psychological community in low income, urban neighborhoods', *Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol 27, No 6, pp.659–679.

Buckner, J.C. (1988) 'The development of an instrument to measure neighbourhood cohesion', *American Journal of Community Psychology*, 16, pp.771–791.

Campbell, L. (1997) 'Child neglect and intensive-family-preservation practice', *Families in Society*, Vol 78, No 3, pp.280 – 290.

Chappelle, J.K (1999) 'A Strengths-Focused Approach to Community Development' in *Case Studies in Social Work Practice*, Second Edition, ed. C.W. LeCroy, Brooks/Cole ITP.

Cole, E.S. (1995) 'Becoming Family Centered: Child Welfare's Challenge', *Families in Society*, Vol 76, No 3, pp.163–172.

Coughy, M.O., O'Campo, P. & Brodsky, A.E. (1999) 'Neighborhoods, Families and Children: Implications for Policy and Practice', *Journal of Community Psychology*, Vol 27, No 5, pp.615–633.

Cox, Eva (1995) *A Truly Civil Society*, Boyer Lectures, ABC.

Garbarino, J. & Barry, F. (1997) 'The community context of child abuse and neglect', in *Understanding abusive families: An ecological approach to theory and practice*, ed. J. Garbarino, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco.

Garbarino, J. & Eckenrode, J. (1997) *Understanding abusive families: An ecological approach to theory and practice*, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco.

Hogue, A. & Liddle, H.A. (1999) 'Family-Based Preventive Intervention: An Approach to Preventing Substance Use and Antisocial Behaviour', *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, Vol 69, No 3, July.

Ife, J. (1995) *Community Development: Creative community alternative – vision, analysis and practice*, Longman, Melbourne.

Kenny, S. (1994) *Developing Communities for the Future: Community Development in Australia*, Thomas Nelson, Australia

Liddell, M (1993) Child Welfare and Care in Australia: understanding the past to influence the Future, in *Responding to Children*, Chapter 3, eds C. Goddard & R. Carew, Longman Cheshire, Melbourne

Markiewicz, A. (1996) 'Panacea or scapegoat: The social work profession and its history and background in relation to the state welfare department in Victoria', *Australian Social Work*, Vol 49, No 3, pp.25–32.

McArdle, J. (1993) *Resource Manual for Facilitators in Community Development*, Employ Publishing Group, Vic.

McKnight, J.L. (1997) 'A 21st Century Map for Healthy Communities and Families', *Families in Society*, Vol 78, No 2, pp.117–127.

McMillan, D. W. & Chavis, D.M. (1986) 'Sense of community: A definition and theory,' *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14, pp.6–23.

Putnam, R.D. (1993) *Making democracy work: Civic traditions in modern Italy*, Princeton University Press, New Jersey.

Resnick, M., Harris, L. & Blum, R. (1996) 'The Impact of Caring and Connectedness on Adolescent Wellbeing', *Youth Issues*, Spring.

Scott, D. (1995) 'Child Protection: Paradoxes of Publicity, Policy and Practice', *Australian Journal of Social Issues*, Vol 30, No.1, February.

Scott, D. & O'Neil, D. (1996) *Beyond Child Rescue: Developing Family-Centred Practice at St. Luke's*, Allen & Unwin, in association with Institute of Public Affairs, St Leonards, NSW.

de Shazer, S. (1991) *Putting differences to work*, W.W. Norton., New York.

Slocum, R. & Thomas-Slayter, B. (1995) 'Participation, empowerment and sustainable development' in *Power, Process and Participation*, eds R. Slocum, L. Wichhart, D. Rocheleau & B. Slayter-Thomas, Intermediate Technology Publications, London.

White, C. & Denborough, D. (1998) *Introducing Narrative Therapy*, Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide.

White, M. (1997) *Narratives of Therapists Lives*, Dulwich Centre Publications, Adelaide.