Building community capacity for children, youth and families

Robert J. Chaskin

Communities have long been seen as of central importance to individuals and families, and as critical lever for change. In recent years, the emphasis on community as an organizing principle to address a range of social problems and developmental needs of children and families has been increasing. This paper explores the question of why community is important for children and families, what communities can provide for their well-being, and how they might be strengthened. It outlines some of the reasons behind the interest in community as a locus for policy and practice, explores the idea of 'community capacity' and how to build it, and distills the principal strategies used by contemporary efforts to build capacity in disadvantaged communities. Finally, it examines both the promise and the limitations of a community capacity framework as an orientation toward social change and as an approach for addressing the needs of disadvantaged children and families.

KEYWORDS: community, community capacity, community building, social capital, community organizing

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The idea of community is both evocative and problematic. Community is both acknowledged and contested, sought for and lamented. It suggests images and feelings of identity, of belonging, of shared circumstance and common cause. It can also be a tool for exclusion, and a site of division and conflict. Indeed, the search for community, fears about its demise, and renewed efforts to establish its strength have been ongoing, emerging and re-emerging as an explanation of current social ills (usually due to community's perceived decline) or as a solution to them. This has included a search for community in different places, from the neighborhood to the church; from professional associations to internet chat rooms; from a focus on ethnic roots to solidarity around gender or class or sexual orientation.

There has also been an enduring focus on *local* communities—neighborhoods, villages, towns—as of central importance to individuals and families, and as critical lever for change. This emphasis has been increasingly prevalent in recent years. Community has been invoked as an organizing principle for a range of policy and practice approaches to address a broad range of issues connected to child well-being, family functioning, poverty, social justice, and many other issues. These include various kinds of community-based service delivery, service coordination, and service reform efforts, including those focused on child protection and family support; juvenile justice and crime initiatives such as community-based gang-intervention efforts, as well as youth mediation and 'restorative justice' schemes; efforts to promote community-based developmental opportunities for youth (such as through recreational and after-school programs); and broad-based community development or 'community building' initiatives to make disadvantaged neighborhoods more supportive environments for children, youth, and their families.

So what is it that 'community' provides—and what are its limitations—as an organizing principle for policy and practice that concerns the well-being of children, youth, and families? In exploring this question, I will try to do four things:

First, I'll outline some of the reasons behind why the local community has come to serve as an organizing principle for many of these efforts. Second, I'll explore the idea of 'community capacity,' and how to build it. Third, I'll outline some of the ways in which contemporary efforts are

attempting to build capacity in disadvantaged communities, focusing on some of the most common strategies. Finally, I'll distill some key dimensions of both the promise and the limitations of a community capacity framework as an orientation toward social change and an approach for addressing the needs of disadvantaged children and families.

WHY COMMUNITY?

The current interest in community is part of a broader trend, particularly when focused on the disadvantaged and on children and families, away from narrowly categorical, problem-oriented, bureaucratically delivered services and programs and toward more holistic, preventive, and promotive orientations. This has come about for several reasons.

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One is the recognition that the needs and circumstances of children and families—especially poor children and families—are often interrelated, and the conviction that the local community is where many of these needs and circumstances come together (e.g. Blythe & Leffert 1995; Garbarino 1992). This is true for at least two reasons. First, given the geography of disadvantage in many places, the relative incidence of social problems that tend to correlate with one another—for example, poverty, child abuse and neglect, teenage parenthood, substance abuse—and cluster in particular local areas (e.g. Sampson 1999; Sampson, Morenoff & Gannon-Rowley 2002; Wilson 1987). Second, those who are less affluent, less mobile, and less well-integrated in society (for example, children, poor families, ethnic minorities) tend to rely more on their local community both for many basic goods and services (to the extent they exist there) and for instrumental, informal relationships (Ahlbrandt 1984; Campbell & Lee 1992; Lee, Campbell & Miller 1991).

Another reason for this focus on community is that, for operational purposes, it has come to be seen as an important unit of action, both because it provides a manageable scale at which to work and in which investments can be concentrated, and because of the belief that local communities have particular assets to bring to bear on the problems they confront—and that they can be mobilized to do so.

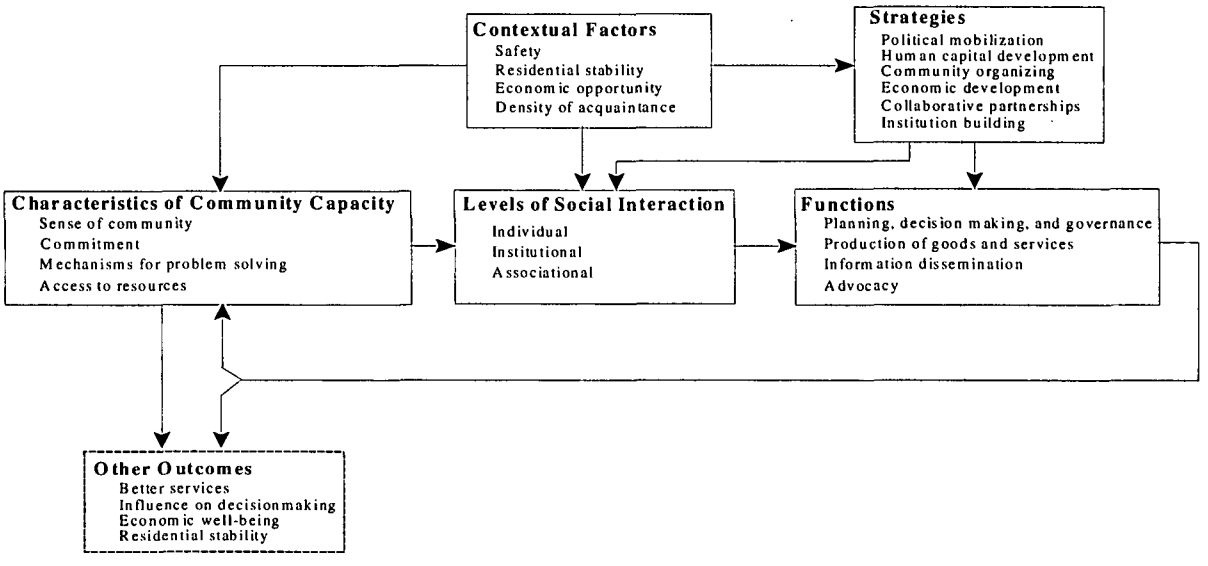
Finally, this focus on community is supported by increasing research focusing on the effects that living in particular neighborhoods has on child development and well-being, and increasing evidence that indeed, for children and youth, community context matters—although not necessarily in simple and direct ways (Brody et al. 2001; Brooks-Gunn, Duncan & Aber 1997; Furstenberg et al. 1999; Rankin & Quane 2002; for reviews, see Gephardt 1997; Sampson, Morenoff & Gannon-Rowley 2002). Although direct effects are relatively weak compared to factors such as family poverty and mother's level of educational attainment, community context can have a significant effect on the social processes—such as parenting behavior, peer influence, monitoring and informal social control—that contribute in important ways to family functioning and child well-being (Furstenberg et al. 1999). For young children, community effects are generally mediated by parents and the home environment, though as kids get older, they are more heavily influenced by institutional environments (such as school) and, as they move into adolescence, by peers and by neighborhood processes directly (Aber et al. 1997).

There are two aspects of local communities that seem to matter for the well-being of children and families. The first is a set of 'compositional' factors—that is, descriptive attributes of community make-up, structure, and circumstance. These include, for example, levels of concentrated poverty, crime, the concentration of single-parent families, housing quality, physical disorder, racial isolation, residential stability and home ownership, and the presence of relatively affluent families and professional and managerial workers.

Neighborhood poverty, for example, has been associated with high rates of child abuse, teenage births, low birth-weight rates, school dropout, and social disorder and delinquency (e.g. Coulton et al. 1995; Coulton & Pandey 1992; Garbarino & Crouter 1978). The presence of relatively affluent neighbors is related to child IQ and school completion (e.g. Brooks-Gunn et al. 1993; Crane 1991). Residential instability is associated with increased levels of violent crime and the extent of local friendship networks (Sampson 2001; Sampson & Groves 1989). Again, these factors often come clustered together—both with one another (poverty with crime with social and physical disorder, etc.) and within particular neighborhoods, and their presence is unequally distributed across local communities.

The second type of community-level factor that seems to matter is the set of mechanisms and processes through which communities function. These processes both shape the nature of day-to-day community life and can reduce or exacerbate the effects of negative factors like those I just outlined. These include, in particular, the availability and use

Figure 1
A Relational Model of the Dimensions of Community Capacity and Capacity Building



of 'social capital'—that is, both the nature of social ties and interaction and the context of trust and norms of reciprocity within which these relationships inhere; the presence, accessibility, and activities of a range of institutional resources—from schools and libraries to service organizations, businesses, recreational facilities, and employers; and the ways in which residents use such resources in the context of their day-to-day lives (Sampson, Morenoff & Gannon-Rowley 2002).

Given the relevance of community for children and families, particularly for those living in disadvantaged circumstances, there are a number of different ways to think about community as an organizing principle to inform policy and practice for children, youth, and families. One focuses on communities as context; a second on communities as targets of intervention; and a third on communities as units of action.

Community as *context* focuses on communities as local environments providing a set of risk and protective factors that have an influence on the well-being of community members. This perspective is concerned with understanding the aspects of community that promote or inhibit, enhance or diminish well-being within communities—that is, among the individuals, families, children, and youth who are part of them.

Interventions that see communities in this light tend to focus on working with families in response to such conditions—that is, by 'taking account' of community context to better address individual and family needs. In this way, understanding community circumstances and dynamics and the ways in which they are likely to affect service users—what they need, the barriers they face, the resources and relationships upon which they may rely—can inform, among other things, the types of services provided, location and collocation strategies, approaches to outreach and engagement, and styles of interaction. Service-provision strategies in this view might focus, for example, on helping families manage risk better, more effectively navigate the dangers of their community environment, or facilitate their access to the resources available there.

The provision of family management skills training, family support services, connecting parents with schools, promoting access to health services are some examples.

Second, community can be defined as a *target of intervention*, not merely taken account of, but in which particular aspects of the community environment are identified that are to be changed through planned intervention in support of families. This may include, for example, efforts to reduce crime such as through increased suppression tactics (like more police) or prevention approaches (like youth opportunities and counselling) or attempts to promote economic opportunity (such as through local economic development or by fostering access to employment elsewhere).

Third, community may be treated as a *unit of action*, an organized collectivity with particular actors and capacities that can be brought to bear to support families and promote broader change. This may occur through the work of individual community members, organizations, and enacted relationships (formal and informal, interpersonal and interorganizational) within and beyond the community itself. In this case, beyond changing particular aspects of the

community environment and attempting to provide services or programs in particular domains—better schools, more housing, safer streets, better jobs—the focus is on enhancing the 'capacity' of the community to manage, promote, and sustain particular kinds of change and to provide for the well being of its members over time.

COMMUNITY CAPACITY AND THE CAPACITY-BUILDING AGENDA

But what is community capacity and how is it built? The definition that I propose is that community capacity is the interaction of human capital, organizational resources, and social capital that can be leveraged to solve collective problems and to improve or maintain the well-being of a given community.

By human capital, I mean in this context the skills and knowledge of individuals that can be brought to bear on community circumstances. By organizational resources, I refer to the existence of organizations and institutions with the means to organize, plan, and produce goods and services for a community and to represent the community to outside actors. By social capital, I mean the instrumental relationships that exist among community members and organizations that can have an impact on community well-being—the 'resource potential of personal and organizational networks' (Sampson, Morenoff & Earls 1999).

But to operationalize this definition, and to use it as a way to better understand how one might seek to *build* capacity in communities, it's useful to try to break down the concept into a set of component dimensions that relate to one another in particular ways (see Figure 1).

The first dimension focuses on a set of particular characteristics that communities 'with capacity' have in some combination. The first is a *sense of community* (McMillian & Chavis 1986), that is, some level of connectedness and the recognition of mutuality of circumstance among members. This does not need to be among all members, and this sense of community is not necessarily particularly affective. One's connection can be around quite instrumental concerns—the quality of the school, the need for safe streets.

A second characteristic of communities with capacity is a level of commitment, a certain number of actors (individuals, organizations) who see themselves both as 'stakeholders'—that what happens in and to the community matters to them—and are willing to *act* in ways that benefit the community. Such commitment can be acted on in quite informal and spontaneous ways (a resident who takes it upon herself to check in on an elderly neighbor from time to time, or intervenes to defuse an altercation on the street, or plants flowers in an unlooked-after corner bed) or it could be more formal, planful, and organized.

A third characteristic is the ability to solve problems—the presence of mechanisms, processes, or structures that can be mobilized to respond to needs and circumstances as they arise, or work over time to address concerns with some concerted effort and continuity.

Finally, a fourth characteristic is access to resources, where 'resource' is broadly defined—capital, information, skills, influence—and where access includes both access to resources within and from outside the community. This link to information, influence, money, expertise, power, in the larger community, and the ability to bring some of it to bear on community issues, is particularly important and often under-emphasized.

All communities probably have some level of each of these characteristics, but communities differ in both degree and emphasis. Some may have access to few resources but have a very high sense of community and commitment among members. Others may have tremendous access to resources but little sense of community.

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The second dimension concerns mechanisms. The characteristics outlined above operate through the work and agency of some combination of individuals (acting informally or in formal capacities as community 'leaders'), organizations (both community-based organizations and, potentially, local branches of larger institutions, such as schools and banks), and networks of association among them (both among individuals and among organizations). There are two aspects of networks that are particularly important to highlight. One concerns the degree of network closure—the extent to which people know the people who know you. This is particularly important in supporting informal mechanisms of social control and support (Coleman 1988; Sampson 2001). The second has to do with what are often called 'weak ties' (Granovetter 1973) or 'bridging social capital' (Putnam 2000; Saegert, Thompson & Warren 2001; Warren 2001)—casual or instrumental rather than intimate bonds—that can connect individuals to networks of association held by others beyond the local community and that provide

access to information, resources, and opportunities beyond their networks of close association.

A third dimension of community capacity is that it helps to accomplish particular functions—it is engaged (again, by individuals, organizations, and networks) in particular cases toward particular ends, whether to produce goods and services (e.g. family support services, housing, youth development opportunities), to engage in particular collective processes (e.g. planning, organizing); or to interact with systems beyond the neighborhood (e.g. to garner resources, to advocate for change).

Fourth, performing these functions can lead to two kinds of outcomes: more community capacity (an increase in the kinds of characteristics outlined earlier) and particular changes in community circumstance, such as better schools or social services or greater influence on public policy

Fifth, it is possible to build community capacity through intentional, strategic action. Such efforts tend to focus on some combination of four broad strategies: leadership development, organizational development, interorganizational collaboration, and community organizing.

Finally, both the existence and operation of community capacity and attempts to build it in any given case are influenced by the context in which it is occurring. This includes both micro-level influences (including characteristics of the local context, like the level of a sense of safety, or the degree of residential stability within the community, which can influence the formation of relationships among neighbors and their willingness or inclination to work together) and macro-level influences (which include factors such as the structure of the regional economy, patterns of migration, or the broader context of racial and economic segregation and the unequal distribution of power and resources among communities).

STRATEGIES FOR BUILDING COMMUNITY CAPACITY

So if community capacity is a goal—in this context, strengthening communities to act effectively on behalf of their children and families—how might this be done? The four broad strategies I outlined above focus, in one way or another, on the actors through which capacity works—people and organizations—and on relationships among them.

Leadership development efforts seek to bolster the ranks of local individuals who are willing and able to assume some responsibility for the community's well-being. Leaders in this sense are change agents. They may sit in formal (recognized) leadership positions (head of an agency, church pastor) or act much more informally. Leaders act with others in a community—leadership is relational—to perform a number of possible tasks, including to define objectives and develop a vision, to provide and maintain a structure for group work and interaction, to take individual action, and facilitate group action, to represent a group (the community or a subset) to external actors, or to facilitate adaptive work—improvise, reframe, refocus in cases where current structures and strategies don't work. Leadership development efforts often focus on either training community members to take on particular kinds of roles, or shaping opportunities for community members to engage directly in community-change activities and, through this, develop the skills, knowledge, and connections that may set the stage for future action.

A second strategy focuses on *organizational development.* Organizations are another mechanism through which community capacity works. Organizations play a range of critical roles in communities. They produce needed goods and services (education, recreation, child care, houses, health care, facilities for worship, etc.). They provide access to resources and opportunities (information, referrals). They foster the development of human capital (through training and services they provide). They create or reinforce community identity (through provision of 'safe space' and opportunity for coming together or through intentional symbolic campaigns). They support community advocacy (act as representative on behalf of community—or a portion thereof—to external players and powers). Organizational development strategies seek to enhance the ability of community organizations to do work and act on behalf of the community in a variety of ways, particularly by either strengthening existing organizations (through support for staff training, fund-raising, strategic planning, the development of management systems, and so forth), or helping existing organizations take on new roles or functions (for example, providing different kinds of services, or engaging in advocacy or development activities as well as service provision), or creating new organizations (if there is a significant gap in the number or kind of organizations, or when working through an existing organization is ill advised, politically or otherwise).

A third major strategy focuses beyond individual organizations to the broader *organizational infrastructure* of a community, in particular on changing the ways individual organizations relate to one another and to actors beyond the neighborhood. This may include fostering instrumental links among particular organizations to encourage more effective provision of services and development activities or developing broader collaboration and shifts in responsibility toward 'systems reform' in the funding, development, and delivery of services to the community. Strategies for building organizational collaboration in a community fall into three broad categories. One is what might be called 'broker organizations,' which are essentially local intermediaries that play a role in connecting community

organizations to one another, to institutions outside the community, and to resources (funding, information, connections) that can help organizations—individually or collectively—do their work more effectively. Another is through more broadly structured collaborative arrangements, such as formal coalitions or less formal interorganizational collaboratives that provide a forum for ongoing interaction among a set of community organizations, and some mechanism for joint planning, prioritizing, fundraising, and advocacy. Yet another is through specialized partnerships developed for particular, instrumental ends. These may range from rather limited agreements to sharing information, to more concrete resource exchanges (for example, of staff or facilities), to yet more structured partnerships, for example, on joint projects.

The fourth major strategy for building community capacity focuses on *community organizing*. This may build on both individual and organizational strategies, with a particular focus on mobilizing collective action either for particular productive ends—for example, a community clean-up or child-care cooperative—or to influence the actions of outside actors—for example, to change school policy, or provide more community-responsive policing, or allocate more public resources for after-school programs or child care.

Each of the strategies outlined can lead to good things in communities, though by themselves are likely to be somewhat limited. Connections among the four major strategies for creating community capacity are also potentially important. Individual leaders are central to increasing the capacity and effectiveness of organizations. Organizational development and community organizing each provide ready opportunities for developing community leaders. The impact of an organizing effort can and often does depend on the strength and 'staying power' of the organization behind it. Productive relationships *among* organizations require strong participating organizations. And the success of collaborative strategies frequently rests heavily on successful leadership development.

On the other hand, even such comparatively simple approaches as helping existing groups take on new roles can become quite complicated—politics intrude, people behave in unexpected ways, the timing of key program events becomes hard to adapt to changing circumstances in the community.

CONCLUSIONS

The foregoing suggests both real possibilities for engaging in these strategies to support and build community capacity on behalf of children and families, and some limitations when we focus only at the community level. Regarding challenges and limitations, I want to outline three:

The first concerns a fundamental dilemma in focusing on community as a unit of action and change, and that is the tension between people and place. Community improvement and human capital development in disadvantaged communities, when successful, may have difficulty managing change in ways that redound *both* to the well-being of individuals in such communities and to the sustainable improvement of the community itself. On the one hand, successful intervention may provide community members with skills, opportunities, and connections that allow them to move on to other communities. On the other hand, successful development may put in motion market forces that lead to gentrification and the displacement of lower-income residents as community circumstances improve.

The community provides a useful foundation for action, planning, and advocacy. It is an important context of opportunity and constraint for those who live there—particularly for children—as well as others who are less well off and less well integrated into the larger society, and therefore more reliant on what their local community has to offer.

Second, it needs to be recognized that communities are not monolithic; they contain people of different backgrounds, with different interests and values, and different orientations to community and community problems. Although community members may agree at a general level about basic priorities—for safe public space, clean streets, good schools, quality services—they may not agree on the *details* (for example, what makes for 'quality' services, and what services should be available in one's immediate neighborhood), or on the *means* for attaining them, or on whose *responsibility* it is to bring them to pass. Gains for some are losses for others. Community is fundamentally contested ground, and community capacity can be used for good (for example, ensuring access to responsive, high-quality, developmentally oriented programs for youth) or for ill (for example, rallying community power to impose exclusion of potential newcomers based on their race or ethnicity).

Finally, a focus on community capacity may be fundamentally limited in the outcomes it can achieve in certain cases. Many of the circumstances that shape life in disadvantaged communities—poverty, inequality, discrimination—are neither generated nor reproduced at the

local level, and the solutions to these more fundamental, structural social problems likely also lie elsewhere.

Balancing this, the possibilities of promoting stronger communities are, I think, promising. The community provides a useful foundation for action, planning, and advocacy. It is an important context of opportunity and constraint for those who live there—particularly for children—as well as others who are less well off and less well integrated into the larger society, and therefore more reliant on what their local community has to offer. Addressing basic needs—accessible and responsive human services, quality goods, the safety and availability of public space, affordable housing—can often be best done in local communities. Planning and delivery of such services can be more directly tied to stated priorities of community members and with reference to the specific circumstances and dynamics at work in specific places. Organizations and strengthened networks among individuals can act as conduits for residents to learn about and gain access to opportunity beyond the community. And an organized community can provide a necessary foundation for effective mobilization and advocacy to effect change in broader policy arenas and in the practice of external actors such as developers and government service agencies.

So although we need to be careful not to assume local communities—particularly the most disadvantaged among them—can (or should be held responsible to) shoulder the burden of provision and problem-solving, there is much that *can* be done locally. For the rest, we need to consider how to work at different levels of intervention and advocacy, and to frame our actions with both reasonable expectations and a long view. ■

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INVITED COMMENTARY by Cathy Humphreys

on 'Building community capacity for children, youth and families' by Robert J. Chaskin

I write this response to Associate Professor Robert Chaskin on the eve of the inauguration of Barak Obama as President of the United States. Much has been made of Obama's role as a community organiser on the Southside of Chicago – skills, knowledge and values he so effectively deployed in building a mass, grassroots campaign for his presidency. Clearly, Chicago has a rich heritage in this area to which Robert Chaskin contributes.

Foregrounding community capacity building unlocks a rich but marginalised strand in Australian children, youth and families work. Nothing could be more timely as the sector works to engage with consultation for a proposed National Child Protection Framework. In this consultation a clear stance was taken by a consortium of community sector organisations and academics that more resourcing was needed 'upstream' to prevent children washing into the tertiary, statutory system of child protection which is currently draining resources with little evidence of family capacity building (Australia 2008). Community building is a central, not a marginal, aspect of such a strategy.

It is very easy to find an alignment with the themes raised in Robert's paper. The way in which the notion of community is both affirmed and problematised has resonance for everyone. The ideas and succinct description of the ingredients of community capacity building provide a thoughtful and informed discussion of key issues in building local communities to support children in their diverse families. In response to Robert Chaskin, I thought it worthwhile to build on his work through consideration of three areas which are pertinent to the Australian context.

Firstly, community capacity building to strengthen the environment in which children can grow and thrive in Australia should begin with acknowledgement of Indigenous communities. Our Aboriginal child care agencies across Australia are of one voice in advocating community strengthening: family is part of community and community is situated in country (SNAICC 2007). It is not a relationship which can be ignored in spite of its complexities, and those complexities include high levels of family violence and child abuse and neglect in many communities. Nevertheless, the family and community level is the start point in addressing safety and well-being for Aboriginal children and their families if we are to avoid some of our more dismal endpoints illustrated so terribly in the Stolen Generation.

Secondly, there is much in Robert's paper which builds on and condenses the rich tradition of local community capacity building. I am struck by 'a next generation' move in the Australian context which has developed useful tools in 'measuring' community capacity. This allows communities to 'benchmark' their work – and strikes me as something different from earlier community development work which could have been accused of 'cardiac evaluation – if it feels good then it must be working'[1].

One rich strand of work involves Jesuit Social Services working with Professor Tony Vinson. These projects have looked at ways of documenting social disadvantage and social cohesion in Australia (Vinson 1999, 2004, 2007). In these studies, neighbourhoods are taken by postcode and parameters of adversity, disadvantage and cohesion audited. Of particular interest in relation to Robert's work is the documenting of community cohesion as an issue of resilience. Three parameters of cohesion are identified: i) the extent of local volunteering; ii) the availability of help from neighbours at times of adversity; iii) participation in sociable recreation activities. A comparison between neighbourhoods of similar disadvantage designated by postcode showed that the connections between unemployment, limited education, low income and their sequelae of low birth rate, court convictions and child maltreatment (illustrated by lower notifications in areas of higher cohesion) were weakened when there was a high degree of social cohesion (Vinson 2007, pp.86-94).

Examples are given of community development projects which evidenced major changes in social cohesion rating, and significantly a major drop in all indicators of social exclusion, including child notification rates. It illustrates Robert's point that, 'a sense of hope' is an important aspect of community strengthening.

[1] A term used by Nick Collins from Glastonbury Child and Family Services, Victoria.