

ALTERNATIVE EMPLOYMENT IN COMMUNITY SERVICES

(From working paper of Environmentalists For Full Employment)

Ruth Crow

A background paper - Session 3

My task is to present some ideas for socially and environmentally appropriate services which will provide meaningful work for those employed in them. I am endeavouring to show the links between three challenges: the squandering of the earth's resources; the effects of technology on employment and escalation of alienation and anomie in our daily relationships. In presenting these ideas I am drawing from my experience of involvement in different types of innovative community-based services during the past forty years.

Firstly, I want to discuss the new element in community movements of the 1970s. Historically, there has always been plenty of community effort around schools, sports clubs, pre-school centres, art and dance groups, youth clubs, hospitals and around service organisations such as Red Cross, churches and Legacy. Much of this community effort still flourishes and our society would be much poorer without it.

In the past, there have been vigorous political movements demanding improved education, better sporting and cultural facilities and more hospitals, pre-school education and public open space. This political effort has been directed mainly at solving one particular pressing problem in isolation from all the other problems. Until the 1970s campaigns were mainly for more education, more hospitals etc. with very little attention given to quality of learning opportunity or effectiveness of hospitals for preventing ill health. Equity has been seen as having the same education facilities in Brunswick schools as at Melbourne Grammar.

Those political efforts and political campaigns have relied on what can best be described as a community spirit or neighbourliness. Informal networks of friends and neighbours have relied on the fact that people who lived near each other had many informal opportunities to get to know each other and to feel an affinity with a particular district or neighbourhood or a particular issue.

But today these informal neighbourhood networks no longer function effectively. There are a number of reasons why neighbourliness has evaporated. In today's sprawling suburbs many people who live in the same street do not know each other; even if they are nodding acquaintances they are most likely ignorant of each others problems and capacities. People tend to seek out and associate only with those with whom they have close agreement; thus the old neighbourly acceptance of those with whom you do not necessarily agree is ceasing to exist. There are fewer and fewer opportunities to mix informally with people of different ages, different backgrounds and with different views of the world.

This lack of elementary neighbourliness is aggravated by the traditional way of providing social and welfare services and organising community activities. The single purpose pre-school centre, library, swimming pool, infant welfare centre or day-care centre has reduced the opportunities for social mixing and, even more importantly, has resulted in the services and activities being unavailable to those who need them most.

The trend towards segregation, fragmentation and elitism rather than neighbourliness and social mix has risen on the basis of a car-dependent suburban-sprawl which has dispersed the former community identity.

RECREATING COMMUNITY

These developments have been challenged by the 1970s movements around completely new ways of providing services and activities: community child care, community health centres, neighbourhood centres, community newspapers, shop-front information centres, community arts workshops and theatre groups - all grass roots efforts to recreate a community spirit which has flagged for several decades.

In addition to (and probably partly because of) these innovative ways of meeting some of the social, welfare and cultural needs of people, some of the traditional organisations are modifying their services and activities. For instance, pre-school centres

to provide as well as swimming, (see, for example, the North Melbourne Baths Report), libraries are becoming information resource centres, (for example, the Houghton Report on Libraries) and community education officers are being appointed to help create closer relationships between the schools and the communities they serve.

Of course we have to separate out the rhetoric from the genuine movements, but one phrase which occurs again and again in all types of organisations is the phrase 'creating community'. It is a phrase which could only have been coined in the second half of the twentieth century. In earlier periods there was less need to be consciously concerned about community development, community participation, or community involvement. During the seventies there has been a growing recognition that there is a wealth of human abilities just waiting to be tapped, but that these resources remain dormant unless there is a conscious effort to bring people together.

Moreover the process of creating community does not come into existence spontaneously, nor does it continue to flourish unless some people are able to devote a great deal of their time to creating the conditions for such involvement. The drawing together of people around common projects requires the employment of people whose job it is to facilitate this process. Thus in the '70's all sorts of new jobs have come into existence: child care catalysts, community education officers, community nurses, child care coordinators, municipal recreation officers, arts officers, resource workers, and community research workers, to name only a few.

COMMUNITY SERVICES

From the point of view of employment opportunities these new jobs directly provide employment for some thousands of people, but the employment of a thousand or two or three for that matter, is only marginal in comparison with the hundreds of thousands who are currently unemployed. Yet these community workers or 'social catalysts' can only carry out their tasks really effectively if they are backed up by hundreds and thousands of other workers. We need many more people employed in the traditional fields of health and education - more teachers, nurses, and so on but in addition more specialist instructors in arts and crafts, languages, dancing, singing, and musical activities of all sorts. For example, the municipal recreation officer (MRO) needs a team of coaches, and grounds-people to make participation in sport possible, as well as play leaders, youth leaders, film makers and projectionists.

Many of these functions are already taking place, but only in a very piecemeal and embryonic way. As regards the more innovative services such as community health centres and community child care there needs to be people employed to make the essential community links, involving people of all ages in support systems for the child care centre, making it more in the nature of a neighbourhood house as described in the book 'Seeds for Change', helping to develop networks between families and between people of different age groups.

COMMUNITY EMPLOYMENT

So in these fields of services and activities there is the potential for the employment of large numbers of workers who have the responsibility of making activities and services possible. Thus as well as looking for socially useful production of material goods, it is also necessary to be campaigning for socially necessary services and activities.

A word of warning. There is no doubt that the present Federal Government's policy is the antithesis to this proposed increase in employment in services and community activities areas. The recent efforts by Mr. Viner (Minister for Employment and Youth Affairs) to set up the so-called Voluntary Youth Community Service Scheme shows the Government's attitude on services and activities - no need for community skills, no need for pay, 'services and activities can be performed by any youth - expanding services is to be undertaken by unemployed youth! So we can be quite certain that the increase in employment opportunities in socially useful services and activities is not going to take place without a massive campaign.

The main thrust of this discussion is that community-based services and activities can provide massive opportunities for employment, and importantly, this area of employment is very low in its use of resources. At the same time the participation in creating community means that opportunities for a more convivial lifestyle become available.

The lack of community controlled services and activities means that human effort is squandered. The causes of this squandering of this vital resource are two fold.

Firstly, the process of creating community means that people relate to each other and in the process can do together what they would find impossible to do as individuals, thus a tremendous organising force is released. Secondly, the opportunities for relating to each other through the process of creating community means that consumerism will have much less of a hold over people. Consumerism is best described as the conspicuous waste which is made possible by sophisticated advertising and modern technology.

The privatisation of life in suburbanised Australia as it is today - that is, really starved of community controlled services and activities - assists those who try to foist onto everyone a lifestyle which expects each family to buy privately what was in the past supplied by the community for community use.

The movement around community based services and activities - i.e. the process of creating community - recognises the essential character of human beings. Consumerism, with its commercialisation of services and activities as well as its proliferation of goods, is a pale recompense for the human relationships which are so essential for the well being of people. Last century, with the growth of the industrial system, the answer to the alienation of workers in factory and in mine was the recognition of the need for unity or solidarity. Today, on top of this alienation is the feeling of futility or anomy; the answer to anomy is the process of creating community. The struggle for a more human way of life is therefore through a combination of solidarity and process of creating community. The struggle for a more human way of life is therefore through a combination of solidarity and process of creating community.

It is of little value to save our scarce natural resources unless at the same time we also save human beings from the inhuman unsocial consumerist way of life that is increasingly being imposed on us. Thus, the movement to save the environment, and the movement for more meaningful employment is inextricably bound up with the movement around the process of creating community.

.....