

## **Community Renewal Through Cooperative Endeavours: Claymore community development cooperative project**

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This paper aims to provide some insights on the initial stages of the development of the Claymore community development cooperative project.

### **Introduction to Claymore**

Claymore is a suburb of Campbelltown, located fifty kilometres south west of Sydney. Approximately 3000 people live in the community. Ninety percent of residents are public housing tenants. In the past Claymore has suffered considerable community stress arising from high unemployment, high crime rates, poorly maintained housing and public areas and isolation from the wider community. These have combined to create a general feeling of community wide malaise.

The community, in partnership with the government agencies and local non-government organisations (NGOs), has not accepted that this as an unchangeable reality for their neighbourhood and for the past five years has taken significant community action. This action has achieved remarkable success in a number of areas. The community has identified beautification and employment generation as its next priorities.

### **The underlying assumptions of the Claymore community development cooperative project and its partners**

The Claymore community could be seen as a marginalised fringe area with multiple problems, or alternatively as a community with strengths, assets and as 'a site for solutions'.

Some of the community assets and potential resources that have been identified by the community include:

- High levels of cooperation and social capital between service providers.
- The Laundromat/ Café.
- Community Park project.
- A number of community buildings, such as the Neighbourhood Centre.
- Significant financial resources coming into Claymore and flooding back out again.

- A small but growing number of active community members.
- A significantly underutilised workforce.
- An underperforming shopping centre.
- Poorly maintained public housing (work that needs to be done).
- Underutilised open spaces.
- Residents on 'work for the dole' programs outside of Claymore.
- Community organisations that regularly purchase catering from outside Claymore.

Marginalised communities, by definition, lack the resources needed to reach out to surrounding communities, government and business for cooperative ventures. However, by understanding the micro-economy of the community, in particular the money flows, it is possible to capture some of the money that circulates in a community and create a multiplier effect.

Significant amounts of money come into the Claymore community for goods and services, through government, private and non-profit organisations. Very little of this money however remains in the Claymore community as most of it 'leaks' out to be invested in other communities.

Examples of monies that come into the community include:

- Welfare payments.
- Building and maintenance of community and public housing.
- Staff at the two schools, two child care centres and government and non-government community organisations.
- Services such as cleaning, catering, maintenance and gardening for government and non-government buildings.
- Rental fees for the shopping centre, profits from the shops, maintenance and security.

A significant part of a sustainable economic strategy is keeping the money in the community, or 'plugging the leaks', not only to develop local employment but also to create or purchase community assets that can be harnessed to build the social and economic infrastructure of the Claymore community.

Capturing this money may also create a way of linking into other communities by creating training opportunities and a platform for building micro/ small businesses.

A critical part of building the social and economic fabric of a community is the building of a sense of place, of ownership, where people feel civic pride and are empowered to make a difference in their own lives and the lives of other people who share their place.

Where common identity translates into mutual support it builds and sustains the social and economic fabric of the community.

### **Triple C Catering: A case study**

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## The idea

The development of an employment cooperative was identified at a community visioning day in September 2001. A number of community events were held to build on and explore this vision, including community barbecues. The purpose of these barbecues was to develop community interest in the idea of a community development cooperative, ask people what they thought were employment options, and discover residents' skills and experiences.

*"We received a flier for a barbecue from Ally [the facilitator of the Claymore Integration Project]. At the barbecue Ally asked, 'What do you want for Claymore?' We knew how to cook and we suggested catering. Ted [The Benevolent Society's Community Engagement Strategist] said, 'Good idea!'"*

## The hangi

Several weeks after this initial conversation, the Social Entrepreneurs Network<sup>1</sup> proposed holding a learning workshop in Claymore and invited the catering group to cater for its lunch and dinner. At that time the catering group consisted only of a few residents who had attended the barbecue. The facilitator of the Claymore Integration Project again sent out letters to residents asking for interest in the job. Some people also found out by word of mouth, through a friend, family member, or through the laundromat which operates from the Gumnut Services building. The facilitator of the Claymore Integration Project, the coordinator of the Claymore Neighbourhood Centre and The Benevolent Society's Community Engagement Strategist held meetings with interested residents to discuss the Social Entrepreneurs Network function. A cold lunch menu was decided on, and building on the strong Pacific Islander culture of Claymore a hangi was proposed. As one member explained, "Hangi is earth food - the food is cooked in an 'umu' which is an earth oven."

As soon as the group decided on the hangi things became instantly more manageable. They had very little equipment and minimal kitchen space, so the hangi was the perfect way to prepare the quantity of food needed and keep it warm.

The hangi embodied a cooperative ethos, both in the way the group worked and in the way it was supported by other members of the Claymore community. Bricks were borrowed from the Burnside Family Centre's driveway when extra bricks were needed for the oven. Marietta from the Kalon House of Welcome arrived with saucepans, a neighbour provided banana leaves and Campbelltown Council repaired the electricity at the Claymore Neighborhood Centre twice during the evening. Warming equipment was borrowed from The Benevolent Society and the future cooperative members became employees of The Benevolent Society.

*The Social Entrepreneurs Network function planted the seed of an approach of learning by doing. There was no formal cooperative structure, no business*

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plan and very little equipment, but there was a job. From the start, the project has focused on a strengths-based approach of utilising *existing* energy and resources rather than focusing on a starting point of *lack*. Instead of trying to find more kitchen space for the function, they developed a Pacific Islander menu style that needed less kitchen space. The cooperative worked with the networks, relationships, skills and enthusiasm that existed in and around the group.

The project members agreed that the function was an excellent achievement - there was a 'special buzz' surrounding the event and the group received very positive feedback. People who had been at the conference or who had heard about it started calling the Claymore Integration Project wanting more information.

### **The formation and development of Triple C Catering**

Following the success of the first function, the group was enthusiastic about responding to enquiries to cater for other functions and forming itself into a cooperative. During the first meetings, the facilitators explained the implications of a formal cooperative approach where the members have a vested interest and 'own' the business. This was important for laying a foundation of cooperation within the group and introducing a sense of ownership.

Within the group, levels of experience in food preparation and small business are varied and there are different levels of appreciation about the application of basic cooperative principles. Establishing procedures on a practical level has been a lengthy process. The challenge has been to develop consistency in work practices and in the product that Triple C produces. Without a traditional managerial structure, the development and maintenance of professional practice has been an open group process. Some of the members have experience in the food preparation industry and others have the expertise that comes with raising children or running a household. While the process of combining this experience to produce a formal standard has been laborious, exploring and utilising the diversity of ideas has produced a positive outcome and has been an empowering experience for the members.

The catering project began with 16 members, with the only criteria for membership in the cooperative being residency in Claymore and support for the project.

There are a variety of reasons why people have chosen to join the project:

- "It's something that will make Claymore a better place and [it's] a good way to meet new people."
- "...something for my resume, something for the future."
- "It's good to be your own boss; I can't stand having people standing over me."
- "I need the money."

- "It's very convenient, especially with [my child] and I didn't need any experience."

Engaging people in this project was not about inspiring them with the motivation to participate, but to provide a site for the enactment of existing motivation that was flexible enough to meet a variety of needs and desires.

The project facilitators did not present the option of delaying opening the cooperative for business until a structure and policy was developed and a certain level of training had been completed. From a business perspective this was an unconventional approach, however it succeeded in meeting the objectives and harnessing the motivation of the members almost immediately.

The community and facilitators took the presented opportunity after weighing up risk and benefits, and on this occasion the potential positive outcomes outweighed the risks and difficulties.

### Place and space

The members of the catering cooperative all live in Claymore. For most members, the convenience of working locally is a significant benefit of working in the cooperative. However, working in Claymore is not only about access to employment. The members of the group viewed 'the community' as a site for solutions. They saw other community members as people with whom they could cooperate to achieve something they wanted, and they saw Claymore as a place where they could be successful.

Some of the members of Triple C view a possible future cooperative as being a way of redefining 'Claymore':

- "If we end up with a really good business, Claymore looks better. It will give Claymore a better name... people say too many negative things about Claymore."
- "The cooperative will be good for Claymore... it will give people a different outlook about Claymore."

This is about redefining Claymore as being a place of social solutions, rather than social problems. It is also about taking ownership of 'the community'. Over ninety percent of the houses in Claymore are 'owned' by the Department of Housing. By utilising Claymore as a site for cooperative development, the residents are strengthening an existing sense of ownership over the social space and actively developing assets, resources and social capital in Claymore.

A commitment to imbuing Claymore with a positive sense of place is an acknowledgement by the residents of the link between individual identity and community identity. Community identity both informs and is informed by the individual identities of its members. The cooperative members are actively creating a positive sense of community for themselves to identify with.

An important part of the process was to change the perception of the available community facilities by transforming them into a professional workplace.

Stepping into a space that has been constructed as a workplace has been an important part of professionalising Triple C Catering. The development of the kitchen symbolises the transformation of a community project into a business.

### Roles, tasks and responsibilities

The facilitators have provided support for the group at three levels:

1. **Managerial and organisational tasks** Tasks and responsibilities associated with running the catering business, including shopping, invoicing, taking orders, supervising hygiene standards, supervising food preparation, delivering orders and rostering.
2. **Facilitating the cooperative** Fostering cooperative principles and nurturing the development of a cooperative dynamic and framework within the group. Utilising the relationships already formed between community organisations to garner support and patronage for the cooperative.
3. **Capacity building** Supporting the education and development of the group and the individuals within the group by sharing skills and knowledge, and brokering training.

### Defining the nature and level of participation

A key element of the cooperative project has been the opportunity for members to define the nature and level of their participation. A flexible working environment has been fostered by the group dynamic and the role of the facilitators. As potential owner/ workers, the cooperative members hold the power to decide how often they will work, what jobs they will accept and which tasks they will volunteer for. This freedom is empowering for the members as contributions are determined by their strengths and interests. It also represents an approach which contextualises work within the other family, work, study and voluntary commitments that shape people's lives. The cooperative facilitators have had an important role in nurturing this approach within the group, particularly in ensuring that the way individual freedoms are exercised is consistent with a fair and equitable group process.

Group consensus was reached about what types of work should be considered voluntary and what types of work should be paid. Voluntary work included purchasing equipment, training, developing new products and marketing. Voluntary work contributions are recorded so that they can be monitored and acknowledged. The success of this system rests on a shared sense of good will where comparison is limited (although it exists), a common sense of fairness and a group expectation that each member will take responsibility for making a 'fair' contribution. Certain tasks that are essential to running the business have been carried out by the facilitators, giving cooperative members the choice to take on these tasks at their own pace.

The group has preferred to divide work and responsibility on the basis of tasks, rather than by formalising roles. They value the fact that each member has the opportunity to participate in all areas of the business. This has allowed members to indicate their interest in whichever tasks they have the interest, time or skills to carry out. While common goals and objectives are clearly important for a cohesive group, a flat and flexible structure creates a space where different objectives need not be competing ones. As the cooperative develops, some members are showing particular interest in specific areas such as costing, developing menus or advertising and promotion.

The lack of role definition has meant that there has been a lack of clarity about what tasks need to be fulfilled on an ongoing basis. For several months, tasks outside of those associated with catering for specific orders, such as ordering stock and maintaining equipment, were completed by the support workers. Gradually, procedures have been formalised for the cooperative members to be responsible for these tasks on a rotating basis.

### **Cooperation and collectivity**

The catering cooperative was designed to be part of a network of cooperatives in Claymore, united under the Claymore Community Development Cooperative (CCDC).

With the development of the CCDC, it is envisaged that the catering cooperative will become one of a number of enterprises engaged in relationships of reciprocal growth and support, where the CCDC will provide resources such as business plans, a payroll system, accounts and marketing plans and the cooperative business will feed the growth of the umbrella with finance, resources and members. Triple C Catering has a flat structure. There is no Board or manager, and there is democratic member control of all decisions made and policies set.

Triple C is part of a community cooperative project which aims to strengthen the Claymore community as well as expanding the employment and training opportunities for local residents. A cooperative structure is important for maintaining social and economic capital generation within the local ecology, because it enables community ownership through community membership, which leads to community control. It is hoped that community control will increase the chances of a sustainable, cyclical relationship of support between the community and the cooperative. The sustainability of the Triple C cooperative has also been increased by its community ownership, because the members have moulded it into a locally appropriate project.

The group has developed a firm consensus about the application of cooperative principles within Triple C, which is focused on ownership, control and working together for the collective good. Developing a framework for the cooperative has been a 'work in progress'. This approach has had several benefits. The project was 'real' from the start and impetus has been created

from tangible outcomes. Learning has been concrete and much of the strategic development of the group has been responsive - dealing with new challenges as they arise. This responsiveness has, over time, begun to foster group ownership of the catering cooperative's planning and formulation. Built into this process is a group memory of the problems and challenges that inspired change and new ideas. Group members can see where strategies have come from because those strategies are informed by solutions the group has developed.

There have also been some difficulties associated with this approach. Because the cooperative had clients from the beginning, meetings have been very task-focused as there were many logistical and organisational issues to cover. The principle of cooperation was initially manifested in a perception that everybody in the group needed to participate in every decision. Decisions about the best recipe for curried egg were subject to lengthy discussion. These processes were often inefficient and unsatisfying, and the group's sense of teamwork sometimes suffered because of an unrealistic expectation about reaching group consensus on practical decisions that are usually easily reached by a single manager. In the beginning, however, perhaps the very tangible and practical issues were the best way for the group to conceptualise ownership over the cooperative. Democratic control over the day-to-day running of the business helped to deepen their understanding of the processes involved. The group is now applying its cooperative decision-making process to issues around rostering, uniforms and membership. Over time, group members have become more individually task-based in their participation in the group and some of the work is divided according to skill and interest. A sense of collectivity is particularly apparent in skill sharing and voluntary work contributions, where a commitment to the success of the group demonstrates an emerging sense of ownership.

### **Partnerships and relationships**

Part of the success of the cooperative and the pace at which it has developed can be attributed to the relationships and high social capital which have developed over time between community organisations and some community members.

The cooperative has been supported by several of the community organisations in Claymore and has operated free of rent from the community kitchen and meeting room owned by the Department of Housing.

The notion of community partnerships in Claymore paved the way for the relationships surrounding the cooperative, where the residents involved are not clients of an organisation but active participants in a cooperative approach to local unemployment.

It is likely that the catering cooperative may not have progressed as quickly as it has without this stronghold of organisational support, or be as well placed to meet the many challenges ahead.

For example, considering the cooperative has only recently received funding to employ a worker, Triple C may have taken far longer to establish had the Claymore Integration Project facilitator not been available to provide support and access to resources such as a car and kitchen on a daily basis.

The Campbelltown community, education and health sectors have been the source of most of the jobs and contracts for Triple C. The cooperative's relationship with the Claymore Integration Project placed it within these community support networks.

The partnerships formed by community members were important for gaining local level support for the cooperative.

Almost all the catering group members identified relationships as a significant element of their participation in the cooperative:

- "I've made friends."
- "It's nice to mix with new people I wouldn't normally meet."
- "We are learning to work together... relationships have improved."
- "I think it's important that we all get along."

The group dynamics have been characterised by both conflict and support, and have had a powerful impact on the development of the cooperative because of the flat structure and lack of role division. The cooperative's support workers have played an important role in mediating conflict. Early in its development, the group participated in a team building workshop. This workshop succeeded in giving cooperative members a safe space to 'be heard' and helped normalise group processes. The group has, over time, created its own informal systems of support which have been naturally fostered by a sense of community, a sense of connection as women and as mothers, and preexisting relationships.

The structure of the catering group includes several informal structures where people are linked by their relationships. Within the group there are long standing friendships that preceded the cooperative, relationships that have been formed through other community projects in Claymore and family ties. The formation and development of the cooperative is linked with the strength of these preexisting relationships. These relationships have had more of a unifying than a divisive effect on the group, reinforcing group loyalty, cohesiveness, enjoyment and support. With time, group members have been more willing to work outside of these micro networks and have been more often linked by interest in a task rather than each other, although the social value of working with particular individuals is highly prized by some members. While rostering has never been affected by these relationships, the flexibility of the cooperative structure and work approach has created the space for these relationships to contribute to the strength of the group dynamic.

Cooperative principles have shaped relationships within the group; there is a commitment to creating a positive learning environment and to the importance of consensus.

## Power

### **Within the cooperative**

The division of power within the catering cooperative is not formalised. This is empowering for the individual members because it has encouraged them to function and develop without the constraints of hierarchy. However this has also opened the door for a very organic division of power within the group, shaped by personalities and experience. Part of grappling with notions of cooperation has involved striving for a group process that is equally empowering for all individuals involved as well as for the collective empowerment of the group. While all members have the 'right' and the opportunity to exercise power within the group, it has been important that this right is exercised without compromising the empowerment of other members and the principles of fairness and justice that underpin the project and its cooperative values. Within this context, power is not considered as a finite resource where an individual's capacity to exercise power is grounded in their position within a hierarchical structure, but rather the exercising of power is seen as a healthy contribution to the collective well being. In a practical sense, this notion has been reinforced within the group via the task based focus of the group's energy and decision making. When making decisions around membership the energy flows within the group were competing and sometimes conflicting, as they were circulating within the group and directed at other group members. However more task based and problem solving processes were characterised by a focus on the issue, allowing for individual empowerment to contribute to a collective empowerment.

This notion of power is essential to the group's understanding of cooperation as it is very important to them that they have collective control. Power was initially understood by the group as being mainly about decision making. A growing increase in the group's perception of their power to own the cooperative has most significantly manifested itself in a growing sense of responsibility for addressing issues, completing tasks and the overall success of the business.

### **Relationships of power with support workers**

The cooperative members' own position of power has not existed in opposition to a manager. In this way, power has not been transferred in a dichotomous relationship but has been developed within the members. In this context, empowerment is not understood as giving power, but as a process that occurs within an individual or group.

There is no doubt that the workers supporting the cooperative are imbued with power in that they are being paid for their work and have access to

experience, skills and resources which allow them to exercise power easily. The cooperative members also actively imbue the support workers with this power as they agree to the allocation of certain responsibilities to the workers, such as rostering, budgeting and chairing meetings. However, without a finite, dichotomous power relationship, it is not necessary for the workers to avoid exercising their power for the empowerment of the cooperative members. In fact, the power exercised by the support workers has been particularly valuable for the group, as they have utilised their position to promote the group and have relaxed some of the time pressures surrounding the cooperative by taking responsibility for certain tasks and decisions.

The support workers have been challenged to create the space for the group to define itself and its own processes, thus considering themselves in relation to the collective empowerment of the resident cooperative, while still being active mediators with the aim of supporting individuals in their empowerment processes.

This project has particularly highlighted the value of support networks and partnerships in empowering the cooperative group. In addition to the resources that come with such support, the cooperative has been given a social credibility which has been invaluable for their funding applications, client-base development and relationships with macro level processes.

### **Redefining social participation**

This cooperative project has been important in its symbolic capacity to redefine social participation. The current polarised understanding of 'employed' and 'unemployed' paralyses people as it does not accommodate the complexities of the transition between these two situations. This was particularly highlighted in the constant balancing act required to develop the cooperative without jeopardising the cooperative members' social security payments. It must be stressed that this was an entirely legitimate concern, as the cooperative is far from being a secure source of income for any of its members.

Broadening notions of social contribution through cooperative development and community capacity building helps break down the employed/unemployed dichotomy and stereotypes about public housing tenants by providing opportunities for resident participation on a community level. The value of the work of the residents is two fold. They have been striving for personal development and to strengthen their individual pathways, and have also been strongly committed to making a personal and collective contribution to the future of their community.

### **Outcomes and direction for members of Triple C Catering**

#### **Individual**

- "...a sense of being able to work and earn money."

- "I'm so proud of what I can make for my friends at a party."
- "I'm very happy; I've learnt a lot of things."
- "If I've done a good job, I've earned my money."
- "I haven't really learnt much."
- "I'm more open and confident."
- "...self esteem - I feel like I'm worth something."
- "Friendships..."
- "It's given me training and experience."
- "I've made friends."
- "It might be useful for my career - maybe."
- "At first I wasn't excited about doing it, but now I'm learning heaps - it's good for the future."

**Training:** In keeping with cooperative principles, the facilitators of the cooperative view training and education as key elements of the cooperative project. The cooperative members have had the opportunity to study for Certificate IV in Catering. This course has been subsidised by TAFE and by the cooperative budget. A couple of the members already have the equivalent of this qualification and have perhaps not experienced the same growth of their skills and training base as others.

**Employment:** Eleven people in Claymore now have jobs. This has had some financial benefits for them, and a sense of worth and productivity has also followed. There is a strong feeling that the project will be worthwhile for the members personally, as well as being worthwhile for the community.

**Experience:** The members of Triple C Catering are developing many new skills, not only on the catering industry, but also in small business, cooperative development, teamwork and computer literacy.

**Personal development:** Several members have identified that their involvement in the cooperative has increased their confidence, feelings of self worth and self esteem. Triple C has afforded them the opportunity to have an empowering experience of work and

### For further information

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