



e-Atherton Gardens

A wired community in a public housing estate

The electronic Atherton Community Enterprise (eACE) in inner Melbourne was established with two aims: to improve the social, economic and environmental circumstances of the Atherton Gardens community, and to strengthen the capacity and cohesiveness of the community and its networks.

Addressing the digital divide in a disadvantaged community

Atherton Gardens is a multi-ethnic public housing estate and is largely low income. There are 800 apartments in four tower blocks with about 2000 residents. Many are immigrants from Vietnam, China and some 30 other countries. Unemployment is high and there is a range of social issues on the estate.

Infoxchange, a Melbourne-based non-profit community technology organisation, initiated the project, which provides infrastructure and support so all residents can be connected to a computer network. The project, formerly called Reach for the Clouds, is now eACE.

Key aspects of the development process included:

- extensive community consultation and the establishment of a residents' steering committee
- resources and professional input from several parties including Infoxchange, Microsoft,

Hewlett Packard, and several Victorian government agencies

- seed funding from the Office of Housing with a three-year grant from the Community Support Fund
- wiring the apartment blocks with free computers
- information technology skills training for residents.

While several Victorian Government and local government agencies and community groups have supported the project, a feature has been the research, monitoring and evaluating of the various stages of the initiative. A team of researchers from Swinburne University of Technology's Institute for Social Research, funded by an Australian Research Council grant, conducted the research from 2001 to 2004.

While it started out to address the digital divide in a disadvantaged community, the project had several other objectives and these took the initiative in other directions such as improving access to education and employment for residents and building social capital.



A longer-term objective is to develop a new style of social enterprise based on community ownership and control, and this journey is still under way.

The project has been heavily dependent on government funding and Infoxchange's leadership role. The Community Support Fund grant will end in 2005 and further income will be needed for network and computer maintenance, Internet service provision and general administration.

Infoxchange has been examining several options which could sustain the initiative beyond 2005. While continued government funding is a possible option, the main development effort has focused on sustainable social enterprises, including looking at developing a sustainable business model based on the infrastructure developed through the project. Infoxchange has also allocated resources to develop a skilled and motivated workforce with the technical and management expertise needed to operate a business.

Business plans are being developed based on alternative ways of generating commercial revenue.

Benefits

The project's two main objectives have brought benefits to individual residents and to the community.

The first, information technology training, has contributed significantly to improving the social, economic and environmental circumstances of the community. It enables residents to expand their employment options and provides foundation skills that they can apply to their employment, education, community and personal pursuits. Having better skills, and being able to apply them, also contributes to increased self-esteem and confidence.

The second, strengthening the capacity and cohesiveness of the community, is longer term. However, each stage of this process produces its own benefits and these benefits accrue and build on each other over time. The initial effect of the project was to reinforce existing patterns of formal and informal association on the estate, especially language-based, faith-based and ethnic groups (Institute for Social Research 2003). This has increased bonding within these groups, contributed to increased social support for individuals and developed the social capital of the community.

Another intended benefit of the project is increased contact between the diverse groups, but this can be seen as a second stage of development. Some aspects of the project,



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such as training activities, cut across traditional cultural and political structures, and this is increasing contact between groups. Such contact develops trust, which in turn has social benefits. Activities such as arts and cultural activities and common interest group meetings might have a similar effect on the wider community.

Community infrastructure that encourages contact and communication between groups develops social capital, and this is a significant long-term benefit that the Atherton Gardens community can continue to build on.

Barriers

The eACE initiative is complex. It has multiple objectives that rely upon effective partnership building, communicating a shared vision, and engaging the community in its vision.

Its community-building objectives have been strongly influenced by the diverse nature of the ethnic groups at Atherton Gardens. While there are strong communities and networks among the established cultural groups, there is less community identity with the whole estate.

Research undertaken by the Institute for Social Research (2003) confirmed that the patterns of social interaction on the estate are complex and undermine any notion of Atherton Gardens as a single community. They found a variety of groups and associations, but also isolated individuals and households. The researchers found that levels of trust were low between the different groups and individuals living on the estate.

Several broader barriers also arose from the external context of the project. Perhaps chief among these was the absence of an existing social infrastructure fostering and enabling partnerships between government agencies,



nonprofit organisations and the education institutions involved.

The absence of a supporting local social infrastructure meant that improvisation was perhaps the keynote of this initiative.

Infoxchange and its partners were required to improvise at each step in the project's development. Although this was a barrier to orderly strategic planning, it also provided a benefit because the need for innovation was highlighted throughout the development process.

Key lessons

The project's development is still at an early stage in terms of the broader community-building objectives outlined by Infoxchange. However, several tentative lessons can be used for future development.

- Infoxchange's role as the catalyst and main developer of the project has been crucial. It illustrates that nonprofit organisations can undertake an intermediary role in marshalling an alliance of public and private interests to develop and promote a complex project.
- There is value in building a research dimension into such projects to provide monitoring and feedback.



- Partnership building has a key role in working towards a whole-of-government and whole-of-community approach, and consequently a comprehensive local infrastructure is needed to facilitate the process.
- The community building and change process is complex in such a diverse, disadvantaged community, and it takes time.
- It is difficult to support and sustain local initiatives with limited funding. Improvisation, rather than sustained strategic planning, becomes the hallmark of such initiatives.
- A new learning model is needed to underpin the provision of education and training services in such a community. The implementation of the project should be regarded as a learning process.

References

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COMMUNITY CONNECTIVITY

More information

In these case studies, communities, nonprofit organisations and groups share their experiences and lessons they have learnt using ICT: enhancing capability and service delivery; supporting and building communities, networks and connections; and overcoming barriers and challenges.

Australia's Strategic Framework for the Information Economy 2004–2006 emphasises the need to ensure that all Australians can participate in the benefits of the information economy.

Key strategies in 2004–06 will be to strengthen collaboration and capabilities in nonprofit organisations, facilitate the creative use of ICT for building stronger communities and social cohesion, and develop networks, capabilities and tools to enable participation by people who are facing economic, geographic or social barriers.

For more information visit the DCITA website www.dcita.gov.au or email community.connectivity@dcita.gov.au.

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