

# Delivering long term sustainable social change through the arts

2/10/02

Jon Hawkes

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## *Speech to the 'Social Inclusion & the Arts' forum, Arts SA, Adelaide, 2/10/02*

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In the briefings for this forum it has been repeatedly impressed on me that the participants bring to this event an enormous range and variety of interests, experience, perspectives, attitudes, backgrounds and power.

This has presented a huge challenge for me – how to pitch what I have to say so that it is useful to everyone.

I now realise that we all do have something in common.

We are all public servants. And by this I mean that we all share a commitment to being actively involved in the development and maintenance of a society in which all citizens are respected, engaged, empowered and fulfilled as well as healthy, housed, well-fed, safe, and informed.

The second set of goals – health, shelter, sustenance, security and education - could, at least theoretically, be achieved under any political system.

The first set of goals – respect, engagement, empowerment and fulfilment – would appear to be unique to systems that claim to be democratic.

The reason we're in this room today is that, so far, few democratic systems, and certainly not ours, have come close to achieving this first set of goals. Let alone in any sustainable fashion.

Intolerance, alienation, powerlessness and dissatisfaction have not been done away with. The democratic dream remains exactly that.

One of the chief reasons for this sorry state is that we have concentrated on achieving the second set (health, shelter, sustenance, security and education – often called the basics) in the belief that, if we get them right, then the first set (respect, engagement, empowerment and fulfilment) will inevitably follow.

This has, in fact, not happened.

This ordering of social priorities has been further skewed by the elevation of 'wealth' to the top of the list. (I am using wealth here in a narrowly financial context rather than in the broader, and laudable way that Greg Mackie used it in his introduction). Rather than recognising that wealth is merely one of a number of means for achieving other goals, it has become an end in itself.

The primacy of economic imperatives is beginning to be eroded: the triple bottom line, Local Agenda 21, ecologically sustainable development are all conceptual attempts to get our priorities into an order that reflects our democratic vision.

It is in this context that I wrote 'The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability' for the Cultural Development Network of Victoria [*contact and purchase details are shown at the conclusion of the paper*].

In this monograph, I argue that '[a] society's values are the basis upon which all else is built. These values and the ways they are expressed are a society's culture. The way a society governs itself cannot be fully democratic without there being clear avenues for the expression of community values, and unless these expressions directly affect the directions society takes.'

You can see from this quote that I'm using 'culture' in what is known as its 'anthropological' sense (in fact, the sense that it's used in the 1996 UNESCO Declaration of Cultural Rights). That is, culture describes:

- our values and aspirations;
- the ways we develop, receive and transmit these values, and
- the ways of life these processes produce.

This usage of 'culture' can be encapsulated as 'the social production of meaning', or simply 'making sense'.

What I'm saying is that of all the things we make, 'sense' is the most important; and that we need to find ways of recognising and facilitating this process in the ways that we organise our society.

In this context, the concept of community becomes extremely important. For me, community is based on the experience of being an empowered participant in the negotiation of common goals and of engaging in social action with one's peers towards those goals. That is, community does not describe an object; it describes a sensation - the sensation of sharing, of belonging, of connectedness, of common cause.

It is obvious that there are significant parallels between culture and community. But a third idea must be brought into play before they can intersect.

And that is, governance. Governance brings these interpretations of culture and community into direct impact with the real world. In this context, the foundation, and essential purpose, of governance is the democratisation and enlivening of the ways in which a society develops a sense of itself and applies that sense to its daily life.

These developments and applications can be described as cultural action.

It is through cultural action:

- that we make sense of our existence and the environment we inhabit;
- that we find common expressions of our values and needs, and
- that we meet the challenges presented by our continuing stewardship of the planet.

Without culture, we are, quite literally, not human.

And a system of governance that lacks an integrated cultural perspective is equally bereft. Not least, because of the essential relationships between culture, community and governance:

**Culture** is the process of making meaning and values;

**Communities** are built on negotiating shared values and the growth of group identity; and

**Governance** enlivens and democratises these processes.

Culture, community and governance then, are in an endless dance; to omit culture (the making of meaning) from this movement is to have rhythm but no lyric. And without the lyric it is easy to forget what the point of the dance really is.

So, where do the arts fit into this perspective?

If culture describes how we make sense, and the results of that sense, then art describes that aspect of cultural action in which creativity and imagination are the key drivers, where we discover meaning and community in ways that are intuitive, non-lateral and unpredicable. With the arts, we can imagine the future, unpack the past, confront the present. We can predict change, focus our visions and face our fears.

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Unleashing the creative imagination can bring about the most extraordinary manifestations of vision and purpose – as was so well demonstrated in the first panel this morning. Indeed, many have claimed that the arts are the primary language through which meaning is discovered, invented and contested.

**Participatory** arts, which is what I'm most interested in, describes empowered and hands-on community involvement in these processes. Its practice embodies the principle that we are all creative and that we all have a right, a responsibility and a desire to be actively involved in making our own culture. And that if we don't, it is inevitable that we will become alienated, disconnected and pissed off.

There is a mass of research that demonstrates:

- that the insights and experiences participants gain through these activities make it easier for them to become better and more effective citizens;
- that utilising these practices in programs such as community education, community building, health promotion, cross-cultural understanding, etc, will enhance organisational responsiveness, delivery and flexibility; and
- that embedding these practices in the everyday processes of governance has the capacity to improve community engagement, communications, decision-making, policy development, expression of goals and evaluation.

So, on the one hand I'm saying that it is a basic democratic right that every community have access to the resources that will allow them to make art, to exercise their creativity, to make and express their own meanings.

On the other hand I'm saying that participatory arts is an invaluable instrumental tool:

- in the process of democratic governance;
- in the development of dynamic social communications;
- in the delivery of public services; and
- in the achievement of a wide range of social objectives, including, not least, the building of community.

The sort of long term sustainable social change that is really needed (that is, universal respect, engagement, empowerment and fulfilment) can **only** be achieved through the widespread application of participatory arts activities.

Why? Because collaborative creativity is at the foundation of forging identity and purpose. And without these, everything else is ashes.

So, what are some of the ways that the long term social impact of the arts can be maximised?

As a short preamble, we should remember that there's been at least a thirty year period of a de facto strategy of public funding of 'pilot projects' in this arena. There are hundreds of examples of isolated instances of arts projects that have been intended to produce social change and that have, in many cases, actually done so.

The problem is that most of these are retained only in the memory of the participants. Anecdotes abound – documentation and evaluation are sparse.

Nevertheless, particularly in Britain, a body of literature is beginning to develop. Beyond identifying Francois Matarasso as my all-time favorite researcher, and volunteering to email a reading list to anyone that's interested, I won't delve any deeper at this point.

What I will say is that past efforts have given us a heap of signposts when it comes to:

*Program development and design*

What we can learn is:

- That initiatives emanating from communities are the best place to start. Particularly ones that emerge from tangible issues, no matter how small, that are of immediate and real concern to those communities.
- That arts practices can be productively utilised in almost any context, to illuminate almost any problem. And that artists and arts facilitators, if chosen carefully, can offer a perspective and commitment that will have profoundly positive results. That the most traditionally inarticulate communities can become startlingly eloquent when they engage in arts practices.
- That arts practices can be usefully applied to initiate community building. That is, in the originating articulation and expression of community values and goals.
- That support agencies need to be able to respond imaginatively and flexibly to community initiatives, not least by having the capacity to provide creative advice and support at the very beginnings of the developmental process.
- That support that focuses on the generation of sustainable local leadership, capacity, networks and partnerships will produce the best results. And that the development of sustainability takes time and long term commitment.
- That community initiative, control and ownership are imperatives. The challenge is to facilitate these attributes in ways that promote inclusiveness, equity and creativity.
- That participation must have integrity. It is the liberation of community creativity and imagination that produces the most profound results. And it is through the direct **experience** of collaborative creativity that the most profound community effects are likely to emerge, rather than through the resulting artefacts.

Getting one's program right is all very well, but

**What's really needed is systemic, structural and attitudinal change**

Particularly from those whose responsibility it is to facilitate equity and justice.

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In the 4<sup>th</sup> Pillar, I argue that the most important initiative that could be taken is the adoption of:

### *A cultural framework*

We should introduce a cultural perspective into the policy making crucible. You are all aware of the current systems based on a tri-ocular perspective – environmental, social and economic. In 4<sup>th</sup> pillar, I argue that, without a fourth perspective, without taking into account the sources, the nature and the implications of the values that underpin action, processes of evaluation can become empty rituals.

This extra perspective would normalise the conscious presence of values in the policy development and evaluation processes. A cultural framework would allow activities to be assessed against criteria like:

- What has been the quality of community input into the development of the actual and proposed activities under review?
- To what extent are these activities reflective of the values and ways of life of the communities upon which they have impacted or will impact?
- Do these activities improve the capacity of communities to act and interact?

In 4<sup>th</sup> pillar I argue that without an active consciousness of the values that inform our actions, and without clear, creative and engaging processes for facilitating community expression and debate of those values, and their practical application, social action is rootless, directionless and ultimately counter-productive.

But in the end it all comes down to:

### *Attitudinal change*

The foundation of all these proposals lies in the mind and in the will.

Unless attitudes change, nothing else will. Unless the agents of governance are able to:

- trust in the creative capacity of communities;
- tangibly commit to democracy;
- be prepared to devolve control, and
- go beyond a service delivery model,

we will continue to spin in unproductive, and ultimately unsustainable, circles.

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*The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning* is published by the Cultural Development Network of Victoria in association with Common Ground Publishing. Copies can be purchased from [www.theHumanities.com](http://www.theHumanities.com)

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