According to the Western Australian Department for Community Development (2006)

***Community capacity building*** *is about promoting the ‘capacity’ of local communities to develop, implement and sustain their own solutions to problems in a way that helps them shape and exercise control over their physical, social, economic and cultural environments.*

There is debate about the similarities and differences between community capacity building and community development (see for example Craig, 2007; Verity, 2007). As[Verity (2007, pp. 12-13,)](http://www.publications.health.sa.gov.au/wplan/1/) suggests, some writers use the terms interchangeable, some see community capacity building as a more “evolved” form of community development while others argue that it is the antithesis of community development’s foundation in social justice.  While I don’t want to get caught up in these debates, we do, however, need to recognise that there are dangers in blindly adopting community capacity building uncritically. Community capacity building can be criticised on a number of grounds. Mowbray (2004, 2005), for example, suggests that a neo-liberal agenda underlies many state-sponsored community capacity building initiatives and argues that

*Rather than being about any substantial social transformation, community-building projects are generally about the kind of low-key and modest local activities and services that people pursue despite government (Mowbray, 2005, p 263).*

By seeking to avoid conflict (despite tension and dispute being inherent in social change) many community capacity building initiatives help to maintain the status quo rather than challenging government or corporate interests and acting as a catalyst for change (Mowbray, 2004, 2005). For this reason I believe it is important to emphasise social justice and a bottom-up approach.

There are three things I want to point-out in the following definition of Community capacity building from Canada.

*Community capacity building is the****continuous process****required to foster the pride and appropriate****local leadership****that allows communities, through their members, to****take responsibility for their own development****(Human Resources and Skills Development Canada quoted in*[*Verity, 2007, p. 14*](http://www.publications.health.sa.gov.au/wplan/1/)*, emphasis added).*

First it is a continuous process. Community capacity building should not be about pilot schemes and short-term interventions (Mowbray, 2005) it needs to involve long-term commitment and a willingness to ask hard questions.

Second, it involves local leadership. Community capacity building should be a bottom-up approach that is community led. But this is one of those cases where a commitment to social justice is crucial. It is important to consider who is included in the “community” that is leading the process. Who is excluded from community leadership? Whose voices are missing from community debate? Whose interests are being served?

Third, if community capacity building is a community-led, bottom up approach, then it is important that the communities take responsibility for their own development. Again, I would argue that without an underpinning of social justice, there is a danger that this can mean that we ignore structural issues that are beyond the control of a single community. Community capacity building needs to go hand-in-hand with a commitment to social change

[The Aspen Institute (1996)](http://www.aspeninstitute.org/publications/measuring-community-capacity-building) identifies eight outcomes of community capacity building:

1. Expanding, diverse, inclusive community participation
2. Expanding leadership base
3. Strengthening individual skills
4. Encouraging a shared understanding and vision
5. Strategic community agenda
6. Facilitating consistent, tangible progress toward goals
7. Creating effective community organisations and institutions
8. Promoting resource utilisation by the community

These outcomes, however, can also be considered processes **for** community capacity building. They provide an indication of some of the things we might be doing when working with a community.

So I would argue that community capacity building focuses on

* Building the skills and confidence of individuals and groups
* Enhancing community decision making and problem solving processes
* Creating a common vision for the future
* Implementing practical strategies for creating change
* Promoting inclusion and social justice.

We need to be careful that as outsiders we do not come into communities with a patronising view that suggests that they need “capacity building”. I want to close with a warning from Richard Ahmat which, for me, reinforces the importance of adopting strengths-based approaches to working with communities.

*……to restore capacity in our people is to be responsible for our own future. Notice that I talk about restoring, rather than building capacity in our people. After all we had 40 to 60,000 years of survival and capacity! The problem is that our capacity has been eroded and diminished. ….I want to say some words of caution about the concept of “capacity building”, which has become the new buzzword of Aboriginal policy and social policy generally. The problem is that the concept of “capacity building” comes to be based on the idea that Aboriginal people are innately deficient, or incapable, or somehow lacking. There is a danger of fostering a hidden bureaucratic racism and prejudice against our people…yes : our people may lack certain skills, knowledge and experience – and may need training and education. – but our people do have skills, knowledge and experience! And our people are not imbeciles. We are fully-fledged human beings who are quite capable of looking after our own children and fighting for their future. So when we talk about capacity building – keep this in mind. (Quoted in Tedmanson, 2005, p. 2)*

This is why, I emphasise a strengths-based approaches such as [asset-based community-driven development](http://sustainingcommunity.wordpress.com/2013/08/15/what-is-abcd/).

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