

COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

What is this?

“Community initiatives” are efforts on the part of communities themselves to meet their own needs and address issues of importance to them.

Why is it important?

Community initiatives are an important part of increasing social capital. Activities, events and services provided by a range of groups and organizations encourage social cohesion, raise awareness of issues of importance and provide a way for communities to have an organized voice.



For example, community gardens provide a wide range of benefits, over and above producing healthy food. International studies¹ describe the role of community gardens as a way of increasing the supply and intake of fresh produce, while also increasing physical activity, and improving psychological wellbeing and the social connectedness of communities. These projects help to create attractive green spaces in urban areas that are underused or in decline, help to reduce crime, and create opportunities for community development. At the same time people have improved food security and social connections, and a better understanding of where their food comes from and how to grow and cook it.

The Christchurch City Council (the Council) recognizes the important role community organizations have in building the capacity of communities to meet their own needs, and in increasing community wellbeing. It provides funding to community groups and organisations to support community and voluntary endeavour that addresses the needs and aspirations of communities and helps to strengthen participation and connections within the community.

Data

Christchurch has a variety of formal and informal community groups providing a range of services from organizing social activities (e.g. bowling clubs), providing a service (e.g. budgeting and debt management), to raising awareness on environmental concerns (e.g. Sustainable Otautahi Christchurch).

There are over 100 community organizations listed on Christchurch NGO and Community Organisation Updater (a website with information on a range NGOs affected by the Christchurch earthquakes).² Most of these organizations provide social services ranging from medical/health to social support services.

Healthy Christchurch is a network of about 200 diverse organizations (ranging from government agencies, businesses, voluntary sector groups and networks) working together to improve the health and wellbeing of Christchurch’s community.³

There is also a range of environmental and sustainability groups. Some are site specific (e.g. Avon-Heathcote Estuary Ihutai Trust, which seeks to ensure the wellbeing of the Estuary and

¹ An overview of literature on community gardens is available in Bidwell, S.R. 2009. Food security: a review and synthesis of themes from the literature. Christchurch: Community and Public Health, CDHB.

http://www.ana.org.nz/documents/FoodSecurityReview_090827.pdf Accessed 26.08.10.

² <http://www.ngoupdater.org.nz/>

³ <http://healthy.christchurch.org.nz/>

surrounding environment⁴), while others seek to increase awareness of a certain issues (e.g. the NZ Association for Environmental Education which seeks to promote and support environmental education⁵).

Other community initiatives in Christchurch include the development of community gardens, and community groups like Project Lyttelton,⁶ Transition Towns,⁷ and Aranui Community Trust Incorporated Society (ACTIS),⁸ which aim to increase community development, social cohesion and resilience. These organizations provide a way for community members to socialise with, depend on and learn from each other. Project Lyttelton and Transition Towns provide a range of services to their communities by organizing timeshares, seminars and providing information on other activities of interest. ACTIS is a community development initiative which aims build a stronger more inclusive community by increasing people's pride in the community and its environment.

Christchurch has 12 community gardens located around the city:

- Linwood Resource Centre
- Lyttelton Community Gardens
- New Brighton Gardens
- Okeover Community Garden
- Opawa Community Garden
- Packe Street Park
- Te Whare Roimata Trust
- Strickland Street Community Garden
- Waipuna Youth & Community Trust
- Te Mara O Kehe-Mane
- The Old Vicarage
- Wai Ora Trust.

There are also a growing number of gardens at primary schools that encourage participation by members of the wider community.

Farmers' Markets are another type of community initiative which is growing in number and popularity.⁹ These markets encourage greater awareness of local producers and allow consumers to meet the people who grow or make the products they sell.

Impact on inequalities

Most of the NGOs and community groups in Christchurch seek to provide a service (directly or by referring people to other groups) to members of the community who might be passed over by traditional agencies. As these groups often help people who may not have the resources or opportunities to seek help themselves, these groups provide a valuable service to the community.

Community gardens are one of the grassroots initiatives that may have an impact on improving socio-economic inequalities and disadvantage. Although research is limited, there is some evidence from studies in the United States that they boost the consumption of fresh

⁴ <http://www.estuary.org.nz/>

⁵ <http://www.environment.org.nz/index.html>

⁶ <http://www.lyttelton.net.nz/>

⁷ <http://www.transitiontowns.org.nz/>

⁸ <http://www.actis.org.nz/>

⁹ <http://christchurchcitylibraries.com/Reference/FoodDrink/FarmersMarkets/>

fruit and vegetables by participants.¹⁰ Other benefits reported were the increased availability of foods that were particularly valued by ethnic groups that ran their own garden, reduced exposure to pesticides, increased community pride, and the ability to participate in reciprocal exchange of produce and/or services.¹¹

Solutions

To ensure these groups are able to continue to help their communities, it is important to ensure they have the resources to continue their services. Resources may include providing funds, an office space or land area and helping groups increase communication options (e.g. setting up a website or funding for newsletters). Many of these groups may also require support in the form of professional development (e.g. leadership training) for its members who run programmes.

Community gardens rely very much on the availability of strong community leaders, suitable land, water supply, and sufficient tools and equipment to be sustainable.¹² Above all, the impetus needs to come from the community. A study of a community garden in New Zealand that was initiated as a community development project under the auspices of a health organisation found that externally imposed timelines and reporting requirements caused enthusiasm to wane and the project to falter.¹³

Data limitations

While information is available on the range of community initiatives in Christchurch, data does not appear to be readily available on the number of community initiatives or the size of the community they serve. There is also a lack of information on how community groups resource themselves.

Connections with other issues

Food security; Open and green spaces; Activity levels and exercise; Social Connectedness; Religious Organisations, Social and Sports Clubs; Democratic Participation; Arts and Culture.

Impact of the earthquakes

As time passes and these papers are updated the initial sections on the impact of the earthquake are going to be kept as an archive of what we thought the situation was at the time. Updates where possible are provided.

As at November 2011

A number of services will have had to find new locations to operate from and may not be able to provide the full number of services to their clients. Some organizations may not be able to operate at all. This leaves some members of the Christchurch community vulnerable, especially those who may not be able to travel to new locations.

The Christchurch NGO and Community Organisation UPDATER website provides community organizations and the community they serve with a method of keeping in touch with each other and ensuring they can keep up-to-date with changes to their status.

¹⁰ Alaimo, K., Packnett, E., Miles, R. A., & Kruger, D. J. 2008. Fruit and vegetable intake among urban community gardeners. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behavior*, 40, 94-101.

¹¹ Wakefield, S., Yeudall, F., Taron, C., Reynolds, J., & Skinner, A. 2007. Growing urban health: community gardening in South-East Toronto. *Health Promotion International*, 22, 92-101.

¹² Successes and problems with community gardens are reviewed in Bidwell, S. 2010. Op. cit. p. 11-14.

¹³ Batten, L.S. 2008. 'Lady is this civilisation?': a case study of community participation in a health development programme in Aotearoa New Zealand. PhD Thesis. Palmerston North: Massey University.