

YOUTHGROW: DEVELOPING COMMUNITY WITH YOUTH THROUGH EMPLOYMENT

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Abstract

Meaningful employment for youth on the margins of society is difficult to find and hard to sustain in the market-driven economy. This paper describes the development of a job creation programme called YouthGrow in Dunedin, New Zealand. The programme provides jobs for 16–24 year olds who fall between training and employment because of social disadvantage or poor mental health. The struggles of these youth are paralleled by the challenges encountered in the development of the programme. The paper identifies the theoretical and social drivers of the programme and explores the potential for third sector, Government and community partnerships to work together for sustainable local change.

INTRODUCTION

Like many seemingly simple ideas, the development of YouthGrow has unfolded in a complex way. This complexity reflects the challenges posed by unemployment, mental illness and being young in today's world. The struggle to belong and be part of the community, with a role and place, is not new. What is new is the lack of consistent engagement by the broader community and officials with the waste and invisibility of people on the margins.

1 Acknowledgements

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Those of us who grew up in the middle of the 20th century often joked about the seemingly endless supply of strangely defined jobs in government departments like the Ministry of Works, Railways or Post Office. However, the restructuring and downsizing of such organisations in the 1990s has left the country better off economically and worse off socially. With hindsight it is evident that such organisations provided many people with a start in the workforce and the allied opportunity to contribute to the community through a sense of role and purpose. Equally, government departments retained many people in jobs who would have struggled in the harsh, casualised employment market of today.

YouthGrow is a turn-of-the-century response to the voices of young foodbank clients in Dunedin and to the concern of North Dunedin Presbyterian parishes for the future of their young. When these young people were asked to voice their dream they said "paid work". This straightforward and heartfelt reply encouraged the emergence of a curious mix of church, community and state interests that have found common and fertile ground to work together on the YouthGrow project.

SOWING THE SEED

In 1999, Presbyterian Support Otago embarked on a series of meetings with Presbyterian ministers in Dunedin. The aim of the meetings was to explore whether parishes and the social service arm of the organisation could identify areas of potential shared concern or joint work. At a meeting at Ross Home in Dunedin's Northeast Valley during September 1999, a theme emerged around the issues of unemployment and poor mental health visible amongst young people in the Northeast and Leith Valley areas of the city. At around the same time staff at Presbyterian Support Otago's foodbank in the central city had been researching ways of responding more proactively to the large numbers of unemployed and unwell young men who drifted in and out of the service. In addition to surveying the young men, the organisation joined in commissioning research with Corpac, a budget service for people with mental illness. The resulting literature review and the views of the youth were unanimous that paid work was the best response to the issues facing the youth (University of Otago Consulting Group 1999).

This information provided the basis for a subsequent discussion held at the Presbyterian Support Centre in downtown Dunedin during November 1999. Participants in this meeting included the Minister of Leith Presbyterian Church, and the CEO and Directors of Family and Community Services and Fundraising, from Presbyterian Support Otago.

Participants explored ways of creating paid work for youth through purchasing or establishing a labor-intensive business. The possibility of funding a feasibility study

through an organisation called the Council for World Mission was identified. A suitable consultant experienced in economic and business development who happened to be a parishioner from the local Knox church was retained to carry out the study. After the terms of reference were agreed, a funding application for the feasibility study was lodged and what eventually became known as the YouthGrow project was underway.

TURNING WHAT'S FEASIBLE TO SOMETHING ACHIEVABLE – WATER TO WINE

An advisory group was formed in order to oversee the feasibility study and provide diverse input to the thinking and operationalising of the project. Original membership consisted of three representatives from the Knox Presbyterian Church, one from the Leith Valley Presbyterian Church, a community employment advisor from the Community Employment Group of the Department of Work and Income, the consultant who was conducting the feasibility study, and three representatives from the Family and Community Services area of Presbyterian Support Otago, including the Director of Family and Community Services, who was the convener of the Advisory Group.

The feasibility study took two months to complete. During this time, the vague concept of creating jobs turned into a substantive proposal to develop a land-based business that could employ up to 24 youth. The land-based theme appealed because of its commercial possibilities and the therapeutic potential of healthy outdoor activity and work with the soil (Fieldhouse 2003, Soderback et al. 2004). It was at this point that the complexity of the planning process started to emerge. The first challenge was to find a suitable business venture, while at the same time engaging potential stakeholders who might also be funders.

Developing an operational business plan while simultaneously obtaining resource consent for establishing the business under the Resource Management Act 1991 added to the complexity. These intermingled strands of activity were to occupy the advisory group, particularly the Director of Family and Community Services of Presbyterian Support Otago and the consultant, in more than 85 meetings over the next two years, culminating in the opening of YouthGrow for business on 28th October 2001. In addition to those with a direct involvement, the development process had drawn in members of the community in which the venture was located, the landowner, and a range of officials and others connected with the city and regional councils.

PRINCIPLES TO PRACTICE

The course of action that created YouthGrow reflects the principles embedded within community development processes of social production (Rubin and Rubin 2001), the politics of transformation (Munford and Walsh-Tapiata 2001), social action (Milner

2004) and the relational/dialogical (Burkett 2001). The emphasis was on concrete action around job creation that built in multiple ways on relationships and acknowledged the complex interplay between personal, political and ethical dimensions of engaging with youth and disparate parts of the community. At the same time there was a need to find a balance between local concerns and broader economic and social policy. Most importantly the project was a creative response to the uncertainty of life for disenfranchised youth and an attempt to find a shared or common meaning between the young people and with others through work.

THE SOCIAL AND COMMERCIAL CASE

In developing the business case the main challenge for the advisory group was to create a proposal that fulfilled sustainable work and social objectives, while also meeting business targets. At one level the concept rolls lightly off the tongue, but anyone who has tried to run a business will appreciate the dilemmas of cost and productivity where the work force capability is variable.

In due course a comprehensive business plan was developed which was the base document for funding applications and for convincing the Board of Presbyterian Support Otago to approve and seed fund the project. The project was defined as a job creation programme with both social and commercial objectives:

... a combination of church and community social action. It aims to provide real work for real pay as a means to enhance social participation of young people in the community and reduce long term dependency on welfare support. (Presbyterian Support Otago 2000)

The project target group was identified as:

- 16–24 years old
- confronting barriers to achieving full-time or part-time employment
- experiencing psychological difficulties
- isolated from community participation
- not achieving employment outcomes through mainstream services
- known to the mental health, welfare or justice systems
- willing to work in a land-based or retail environment.

The Community Welfare team of Presbyterian Support Otago estimated that approximately 1,500 young people in Dunedin fitted the target group criteria. This estimate was based on an analysis of publicly available mental health, youth justice and unemployment statistics. Additionally, the practice knowledge gained through work in the foodbank with youth created a strong conviction amongst staff that marginalised

young people were in need of a tangible social-action response to issues of poverty, ill health and unemployment (Milner 2004).

The commissioned literature review identified a variety of models and approaches to the community care and treatment of mental illness (University of Otago 1999). Consultation with mental health professionals and other providers of services to youth in Dunedin confirmed that there were few opportunities for troubled and troublesome youth who did not fit conventional training, educational or workplace environments.

Previous experience by some of the Presbyterian Support Otago staff in youth work and residential care of adolescents informed thinking about the utility of a group milieu and the power of environments that recognised and supported a youth culture. The idea of building social capital through a positive youth culture connected to a partnership of government and non-government organisations was exciting and liberating (Rubin and Rubin 2001) and informed the thinking of the Advisory Group.

The business plan drew together the concepts of using a commercial venture as a vehicle to achieve social aims and to provide young people with the chance to experience success in a challenging yet supportive environment. The likely start-up cost was identified as approximately \$500,000 for capital plus funding for wages and operational expenditure.

BUILDING FUNDING PARTNERSHIPS

In the course of building the case for the programme, an approach was made to the Department of Work and Income Regional Commissioner for funding to support the youth wages. The Commissioner and key senior Work and Income service delivery managers were very lateral in their approach to generating employment. An agreement was reached on a handshake in early 2000 for Work and Income to pay the youths' wages. The concept agreed by Work and Income was to initially provide a full subsidy of the youth wages, with a gradual decrease in financial support as the programme became commercially viable over an anticipated five-year period. Like a number of other things to do with YouthGrow, this concept proved to be challenging to put into operation within a system that was very constrained by rules and legislation. By the time YouthGrow started 18 months later, a way was found.

The "can do" and innovative approach taken by the Regional Commissioner and other Work and Income staff was an essential part of the foundation of YouthGrow, and resulted in attracting other funders to the project. The Community Employment Group of the Department was also prepared to assist with setting up funding for the business infrastructure and to cover the cost of one adult staff member. The Health Funding

Authority (now HealthPAC) also saw the value of the programme for their clients and committed to funding two further adult staff positions.

Thus, by the middle of 2000 there were verbal agreements to fund the youth employees and three adult staff. There were, however, some tensions with managing differing time frames as progress on getting capital and acquiring a suitable business was variable. At the same time the funding application to the Council for World Mission for capital was submitted during the middle of discussion with the other local funders.

The application to the Council for World Mission was for \$320,000 from the Council's Sustainability fund. This fund was only available to member churches of the Council, and our ability to access this financial support was contingent on local parish involvement. This prerequisite was also something that made the venture more "possible", as it enabled an ideal and grand dream to be pursued by a collective of differing stakeholders who saw the value of the vision.

The path to approval of the funding application was somewhat meandering and took longer than anticipated. A complex set of discussions and processes were involved that included the local churches, the Presbyterian Synod of Dunedin, the Presbyterian Church of Aotearoa New Zealand and the Council for World Mission Finance Subcommittee and General Committee in London. These discussions reflect the community development process in facilitating collective action where consultation and co-operation are integral to achieving successful outcomes (Rubin and Rubin 2001).

Fortunately, the Administrator of the Otago Foundation Trust Board was the Asia Pacific representative on the Council and was able to advise on process and advocate for the application. The other potential funding provider approached at this point was the Community Trust of Otago. The request to the Trust was for future capital assistance in developing the site we hoped to purchase.

It was extremely complex to simultaneously work across different agencies and build relationships with neighbourhood communities while focusing on the common ground of doing something positive for unemployed youth. The success or not of particular applications depended on other applications also being live.

GETTING GROUNDED

The feasibility study had identified the desirability of a land-based business. Several sites and a mix of green fields and existing operations were identified. By March 2000 the advisory group settled on a site in Norwood Street, Northeast Valley, Dunedin as the preferred option. A small one-person retail garden nursery was for sale as a going

concern. It was adjacent to another hobby flower-growing business and had farmland behind the property.

The advisory group's concept was to use the retail operation as a public front, with development of saffron and arnica for export crops on the hillside, and an off-site garden contracting business. The idea was to pay the manager's salary through the retail operation and look to the exporting and landscaping for medium-term profitability. There was also the possibility that the landscaping/contracting could become owner-operator small businesses for youth in the future. The retail garden nursery was on leasehold land that was part of the farm. Apart from the business, the location was also attractive because it was within the Leith Church parish area.

The first site visit was in March 2000, with eventual possession of the property occurring 11 months later on 15 February 2001. YouthGrow opened for business eight months later.

Like the process for obtaining funding, the acquisition of the land took some unexpected twists and turns, including protracted purchasing negotiations. The owners of the land and business worked through all of this patiently. The landowner has subsequently become a generous contributor to ensuring YouthGrow functions effectively, through donating goods and providing practical assistance with site development. The deal reached in the end was that Presbyterian Support Otago would purchase the business plus stock and the land on which it and the flower business were situated. A block of the adjacent farmland was leased, including a small portion through which the creek flowed. This agreement has in its turn proven to have a few complexities that became very apparent in the resource consent process. Apart from a subdivision being necessary to separate out the land on which the business was sited, the creek has created some ripples of its own.

CONSENT, CONSENSUS OR CONFLICT?

The Resource Management Act 1991 provides a mechanism for Territorial Local Authorities to make decisions about permitted activity and the use of natural resources. The term NIMBY, short for "not in my back yard", has become synonymous with getting consent for activities that are perceived to involve people who are troubled and troublesome or difficult. Prisons, psychiatric hospitals, children's residential homes, and supported accommodation for people with mental illness, all face difficulties in getting resource consent. People worry that their neighbourhood will become dangerous to live in and that land values will fall. As a consequence neighbourhood groups vigorously contest resource consent processes. Many of the concerns actually fall outside the scope of the resource management law that focuses on things like impact of activity on traffic, noise and amenity values.

Local councils and the environment court do, however – and quite rightly, too – look for ways to attend to residents’ concerns. Inevitably, processes associated with resource consent take a long time and are expensive. For YouthGrow the process of obtaining consent took from June 2000 through August 2001. Lodging an application required Presbyterian Support to conduct extensive pre-application visiting of more than 50 households in Norwood Street and consultation with residents, pre-hearing conferences, a hearing, an environment court appeal, and the drawing up of a separate agreement about some issues between Presbyterian Support Otago and the local residents, before a consent was granted.

The cost to Presbyterian Support Otago was over \$50,000 from its own funds, which may seem unreasonable. However, this consultative process enabled the major stakeholders in the YouthGrow project to develop positive relationships with neighbourhood communities. These relationships have subsequently proven to be of benefit to both YouthGrow and local residents. We will never know what would have transpired without the resource consent process as YouthGrow relies on community connection and involvement as part of its social action agenda. A neighbourhood Liaison Committee, with representatives from households closest to YouthGrow, and the programme’s advisory group still meet. This committee monitors the implementation of the consent conditions and those in the separate agreement, as well as providing for regular information sharing and problem solving.

Residents’ fears about the possible danger to their children and households from “deviant” youth have proven groundless in the three years the programme has been running. The only unresolved issue relates to the stream flooding and damaging two particular properties. Getting agreement on the best way to deal with this has been complicated, as it involves residents, the landowner, the regional council and Presbyterian Support Otago.

ACTION AND REACTION

A simple bicultural ceremony took place soon after daylight on 28 October 2001 to launch YouthGrow. For those of us on the advisory group it was particularly moving to see the project open for business. Since then, 30 young people have been employed in the venture. Interestingly, the struggles of getting started were just the beginning of an ongoing series of challenges. We should have known the life of the programme would in some way reflect the struggle of the youth.

While YouthGrow has been very successful in achieving its social objectives, and evaluations show 28 of the 30 youth (over 85%) have benefited significantly (Crack 2003, 2004), there has been a dimension of organisational difficulty that has shadowed the programme. Meeting commercial goals has been a major challenge. Also, the

retention of adult staff has been such that after three years only one of the original staff is still employed at YouthGrow. Within this flux there have been issues of staff incompatibility and performance well out of proportion to the size of the adult workforce.

There is an ongoing tension between having staff who are technically skilled in the horticultural business and the need for staff with expertise in working with youth and associated issues of mental health and social functioning. Original staff selections favoured staff with social service or educational backgrounds. This was not particularly successful, with poor commercial results in both maintaining the existing retail business and developing the broader horticultural and landscaping activity.

After a lot of trial and error, YouthGrow is now mainly staffed by people who are technically skilled in the business areas, but with a passion for and enjoyment of youth. Presbyterian Support Otago is also putting more robust professional support systems around the programme. A social worker from the organisation's Community Welfare team visits once a week. This worker is available to the youth to address accommodation needs or social support issues in an extensive way if necessary. Staff at YouthGrow also make regular referrals to Presbyterian Support city-based counsellors.

Death of those associated closely with the programme has featured twice in the three years of operation. One youth employee died in a house fire with another injured in the same event. The partner of a staff member died recently. This man had been heavily involved with the programme, was respected by the youth, and had used his widespread connections to secure all sorts of deals for the YouthGrow business or its youth employees. As the numbers of youth on site has increased, the dynamics and relationships between employees and between employees and adult staff have become more challenging. It has also become apparent that, as with any group venture, there is a critical mass essential for functionality – of the staff group as much as the youth.

THEORETICAL INFLUENCES

The original theoretical influence underpinning the initiation of YouthGrow was informed by Presbyterian Support Otago's commitment to social action for sustainable change at micro, meso and macro levels (Milner 2004). Empowerment and advocacy (Payne 1997) were significant perspectives, informed by relational dimensions of respect, empathy, curiosity and time as a model of practice (Milner 2004). YouthGrow was envisaged as a meso-level intervention involving local community economic development and community development (Dominelli 2002, Payne 1997). In this sense there was also an intuitive understanding of community as being something that was possible through creation of shared meaning amidst the complexity of the youths' lives (Burkett 2001), and the intersection of local and global social and economic policy.

Public sector job-creation programmes were politically and economically unacceptable in the reforms of the 1980s and 1990s. In current debate about welfare reform, public sector job creation is again being identified as a strong tool for tackling poverty and social exclusion (Saunders 2002). YouthGrow fits as a third sector job creation tool utilising a mix of public and commercial funds, with Government, third sector and community stakeholders all contributing to its success. The focus is an optimistic one on youth as the builders of the future.

The notion of YouthGrow providing a therapeutic group environment with the potential for creating connection to broader social networks was important to the advisory group. Dominelli (2002) identifies that, from an anti-oppressive perspective, groups formed around an axis – in this case, youth – enable excluded people to find ways of fuller participation in public life. YouthGrow's discourse was built upon the collective vision of marginalised and stigmatised youth successfully growing themselves and a business. Ongoing publicity in the *Otago Daily Times* about YouthGrow's activity and success (Milner and Povey 2003, Palmer 2004) also fits an anti-oppressive model by raising public consciousness of the position of unemployed and marginalised youth.

Through the programme, the predominant discourse of stigmatised dependency and danger of such youth is challenged (Delgado 2002), and the youth are self-affirmed, empowered and able to participate more meaningfully in the community (Dominelli 2002). A paradigm shift to viewing youth as valued and contributing partners in the community also creates differing social relations based on a strengths perspective and an ethic of care and interdependence (Rauner 2000:10, cited in Delgado 2002:6). Interestingly, the YouthGrow project has also galvanised other groups who were initially opposed to the project. Over time this opposition has been reframed on common ground (Munford and Walsh-Tapiata 2001). As a result, a new community of interest has evolved that strengthens the local neighbourhood and provides for local community economic development.

EMERGING CHALLENGES

The first three years of YouthGrow has provided a number of insights into future developmental issues and challenges. The challenges are for creative involvement by policy makers, communities and organisations in local responses to globalisation through place-based models of economic enterprise that stimulate social participation (Imbroscio and Williamson 2003).

Maintaining the balance between social and commercial objectives is a constant tension. The Board of Presbyterian Support Otago expects YouthGrow to cover its own operational costs through its commercial activity and to gradually provide a return that

can be re-invested in the business. As part of its contribution, Presbyterian Support Otago subsidises the social support to youth employees through counsellors and community welfare staff input to the value of approximately \$20,000 per year. For the last year, there has also been a welfare-staff secondment to provide more on-site support for the social development aspects of the programme, at no charge to YouthGrow.

A Business Advisory Group was established in the second year of operation to support the planning, strategies and marketing necessary for revenue generation at reasonable levels. As the operation has matured, the youth employees and the supervisory staff have taken considerable responsibility for meeting commercial targets and have gained a genuine sense of achievement in being commercially successful.

The long-term commercial independence of the venture will lie in the off-site Garden Creation business and the export marketing of saffron and arnica. Culinary herbs for local markets also offer some potential. It now seems clear, however, that the programme will always need some level of wage subsidy. The financial support recognises the unique needs of the youth employees, and the government and community's responsibility to ensure opportunities for social participation through employment. Additionally, the community of interest that has evolved with government departments, church stakeholders and some of YouthGrow's customers is tangible acknowledgement of the interdependence that exists between marginalised youth and the broader community of adult citizens.

CONCLUSION

Working the land and being in the open air is a traditional human activity. YouthGrow and all involved have taken the time to make a time and place in this tradition with marginalised youth. In the process a community has been re-created both in locality and through a sense of purpose and meaning shared by state, church, community and the young people. This unique partnership provides hope for the future and supports local community social action as a vehicle for social change.

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