

# What we've been learning

## *A story about documenting and sharing CLD learning*

### **Background**

Inspiring Communities (IC) was created to help support and strengthen the emerging community-led development (CLD) movement in Aotearoa New Zealand. Collective community learning was at the heart of Inspiring Communities' foundation and remains a core aspect of our work. We aspired to document and share community-led development 'know how' and practice in Aotearoa so that local communities didn't have to keep 'reinventing' the wheel and so our understandings, practice and expertise could grow in breadth and depth.

When we started in 2008, the IC team and those involved with its establishment, were all learning about community-led development too— what it was, what it looked like, how it worked, and what language best described what we were seeing. In the beginning, we often really struggled to find both words and framing that clearly articulated Inspiring Communities, and community-led development more broadly. We debated (and angsted!) for months about the core elements underpinning CLD and in the end, put our stake in the ground by defining key [principles](#) that we felt captured the 'essence' of CLD.



While we could see community-led development in practice in many communities around New Zealand, the reality was we were attempting to both discover knowledge that was not yet fully understood and test ideas that were in many different stages of development both here in New Zealand and internationally. Thanks to a four year establishment grant from the Tindall Foundation, we quickly got started by developing an initial learning pathway which saw us:

- ▶ engage, connect and reach out to community-led development supporters and bright spots in Aotearoa through publishing regular [newsletters](#), establishing a [website](#) with CLD news and resources and meeting with interested communities, agencies and aligned networks as we were able.
- ▶ bring together a small cluster of community-led initiatives from across the country to begin a process of supported reflective learning to notice and better understand how community-led change happens and what enables it.
- ▶ connect CLD supporters and communities – and their stories and experiences – through encouraging and/or facilitating emerging regional in Wellington, Auckland, Southland, Taranaki and the Bay of Plenty.
- ▶ engage part time brokers to support and enable more 'hands on' support and learning about transformational CLD efforts underway in Tamaki (Alfred Ngaro) and by Whakatohea iwi and the Opotiki District Council in Opotiki (Barbara MacLennan).

### ***Reflecting and Documenting***

By late 2009, after an exciting and hectic first 18 months working at local, regional, national and international levels, it felt like we were finally ready to write some things down to share. We'd been busy as catalysers, facilitators, influencers, translators, enablers, supporters and promoters of community-led development and it was time to pause for breath to reflect, and collate our emerging understandings. Ironically, this documenting process began not with a plan, but with 1-1 conversations with our then Learning Convenor: Jenny Blagdon who interviewed our small virtual team – asking us to download our thoughts about:

- ▶ what we'd been doing and why
- ▶ why we thought things were happening/not happening in the communities we were working in or alongside
- ▶ the different drivers, motivations and tipping points for CLD engagement and action we'd been noticing
- ▶ emerging themes and trends, including which sectors and agencies were interested in and/or supporting CLD approaches and ways of working
- ▶ what tools, resources and processes were proving useful; and
- ▶ core values and principles that seemed to be at the heart of local change efforts .

Most of these conversations were two hours long! And from this process, some 20 pages of common themes and emerging ideas were then distilled. While the material was still very 'raw' – we could see that it contained some key CLD learning 'nuggets.'

Our process of producing *What we were learning about community-led development* was a bit like the inherent nature of community-led development itself – 'organic with intent'. With much to communicate, multiple audiences, stretched resources and often hunches without hard evidence, we set about bringing a thoughtful and considered document into shape.

Actually, it began life as two documents: one that documented the IC approach to learning and the second, specific CLD themes and key new learning – though this was integrated into one document after consultation phase. We originally talked about a twenty page document as the final product – however by the end of our writing journey, we had produced over 60.

As we began, we never realised what a large undertaking this would be. The downside of our evolutionary approach was that we never stopped early enough in the process to think the 'whole' project through from content to consultation, design, proofing, production, dissemination and workshop/training stages. This meant, our next steps were crafted in a 'just in time' way. This also resulted in us continually under-estimating how long key tasks would take – especially proofing, formatting and getting pictures from communities to help bring the final document to life. There were many, many late nights, survived only by great team work and a real shared commitment to get our CLD learning onto paper and out there for others to use.

*“In 2010, while we were madly writing and working out how to pull a CLD learning publication together, we didn't fully appreciate what a key piece of work we were undertaking and how warmly it would be received and used by CLD practitioners both in NZ and overseas. This made it all really worth while”.*

*From IC:Development Team Review of WWAL 2012*

### **What did others think?**

In writing our first *What we are learning* it sometimes felt we were constantly moving (not always seamlessly!) between describing what is/was, sharing our/others' learning and also giving advice/instructions to others. In essence we covered a lot of ground – often usefully naming what many people may have been thinking/noticing. But what did others think of our work??

In November 2011, questions about *What we are learning* and its usefulness were included in the National IC: Database Survey. Around 130 people from a range of agencies and places in NZ participated in the electronic survey. We learnt that the report had been seen or read by 57% of the respondents, most of whom downloaded a copy from the IC website (58%) or were given a copy by someone else (34%). 68% of those who had seen or read a copy ranked it as a 1 or 2 (where 1= extremely useful).

*“Your report 'What We Are Learning' has been a great help and I am currently introducing it to CD project advisory group as a guide to coming up with some local CLD objectives for this community.*

*I found this whole report INSPIRING, SUPPORTIVE, INFORMATIVE- I have shared broadly across all my networks.*

*I think it was exemplary work, based in real lives and real communities.”*

*Comments from Respondents in the IC: National Database Survey 2011*

### **Towards What we are Learning #2**

While we 'got by' with our initial 'learning by doing' approach first time round, we won't be working this way again. We've certainly started the process for What we are Learning #2 by reviewing and reflecting on what we learnt from our 2010 experience and building in feedback from the IC network about what they wanted to see in a future edition. Given we now we know what it takes to produce publications of this nature, we've also prepared have an integrated long term plan and budget for our second edition. We are also strategically linking the next *What we are Learning* (due December 2012) with an anticipated 2013 programme of regional workshops and hopefully even a national “communities” conference!

### **Final Thoughts**

While our production process was certainly far from perfect, we know we did the best possible given the time and resources on hand. We feel proud in the knowledge that our work is now helping grow and support a broader CLD audience. In writing things down, we were able to validate CLD action happening and feed to 'thirsty' CLD practitioners practical 'know how' in an accessible and affordable way. Receiving such positive feedback about our 'CLD Handbook' has certainly spurred us on to do it all again!

### **Intent:**

To document and share community- led development experiences in Aotearoa New Zealand in order to:

- ▶ build knowledge and understanding about CLD and the difference it makes
- ▶ support CLD practitioners through providing practical learning, examples and 'know how'
- ▶ promote IC, its purpose and the importance of learning
- ▶ sharing positive stories of hope and change to sustain and inspire others to get involved too.

### Learnings:

- ▶ Think about the **whole** production process before you begin. Put time in to also think beyond the document - in terms of how it could be used, how people will access it, what enterprise opportunities can be harnessed, who should receive copies and what you want them to do with it.
- ▶ Co-creating stories and material with community initiatives is rewarding and including vignettes both validates their efforts and makes things 'real' for readers.
- ▶ Having other key thought leaders and commentators review your publication assists with ongoing promotion and also provides useful feedback for next editions.
- ▶ Allow more time than you think you need – because more than likely, you'll actually need it!

### Outcomes:

- ▶ A comprehensive 60 page document published in hard copy and on-line that documents both theory, experience and practice involved in CLD.
- ▶ *What we are learning* has received wide acclaim and is being USED by practitioners and communities in many parts of Aotearoa, NZ. For many it's viewed as **the** CLD Handbook.
- ▶ Information and learning from *What we are learning* has formed the basis for IC presentations, workshops and discussions with key stakeholders and decision makers.
- ▶ Publishing *What we are learning* has increased the profile and credibility of Inspiring Communities as a thoughtful national learning and capacity building organisation.



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