SEE-Change Paper for the September Conference.

The SEE-Change Movement in the ACT

Authors Bob Douglas, Vanessa Morris, Laura Stuart and Audrey Severino

ABSTRACT: "When the people lead with vision, governments will follow." These words by a former A.C.T. politician, who helped to launch the ACT SEE-Change Movement, sum up its raison d'etre. Formed in 2006, SEE-Change seeks to empower people of all ages in the ACT to modify their own values and to encourage their governments to make the tough choices that will be required to enable Australians to become resilient to a range of approaching threats associated with climate change, peak oil and the consequences of exponential population and economic growth. The SEE of SEE-Change refers to the need for transformation in our Societal Economic and Environmental values. The SEE-Change mission is to inspire, inform and support action to reduce Canberra's ecological footprint. About half of the world's ecological footprint is due to carbon dioxide emissions. Australia's per capita carbon dioxide emissions are the highest in the world and Canberra's are amongst the highest in Australia. SEE-Change in Canberra has a central coordinating committee, now supported by a four-year government grant. Four regional groups work at grass roots level to hold public meetings, arrange neighborhood get-togethers, promote solar panel bulk buys and work with school communities on issues ranging from domestic retrofitting, transport, food purchasing, recycling, water and home gardens. This paper presents an analysis of the evolution of this non-government organization in its first four years. It reports a growing interest in more sustainable food practices as a key element of the modifiable ecological footprint and acknowledges that the task of sustainability is still before us.

Origins

The Canberra SEE-Change movement began with an idea by Canberra biologist Stephen Boyden (Boyden 2004). He argued that the cultural shift that will be required to enable modern Western societies to adapt to escalating threats could begin with an educated minority who understand the threats and are searching for alternatives. Boyden called these individuals "concerned and interested persons" (CIP's). He proposed the development of a network of "life centres" which he saw as fulfilling three objectives.

- To bring concerned and interested people into neighbourhood groups where they could together explore nature and the scientific underpinnings of future challenges.
- To provide a venue for consideration of feasible actions by people in the local community.
- To provide local communities with a new sense of engagement, empowerment and communal goodwill.

In June 2006, the Nature and Society Forum, which Boyden had founded more than a decade earlier, hosted a roundtable of 34 CIP's from a range of vocational backgrounds to consider the feasibility and viability of the Life Centre idea. The group firmly endorsed Boyden's vision and saw Canberra as a good place to test the concept. It recommended that an immediate attempt be made to establish a number of centres or groups in suburban Canberra that fulfilled these objectives. The Roundtable identified climate change and ecological footprints as desirable topics for immediate community education and action. It argued that a new movement that energised the community could enrich

Australian democracy at the same time as it helped to facilitate cultural responses to the serious threats endemic in “business as usual”.

The decision to re-badge “Life Centres” (the term used by Boyden) as “SEE-Change Centres” was made by the steering group, which had planned the Roundtable and agreed to take responsibility in Canberra for implementing its proposals (Douglas 2006). The change of name gave emphasis to the mission of the new movement: the S.E.E. standing for Society, Economy and Environment.

The concept was promulgated in a small book that was published by Nature and Society Forum (Douglas 2006). A key argument of the book was that two groups who may be relatively free to entertain the essential culture shift in Australia society at present are those who have retired from, and those who have not yet joined the workforce but whose future is at stake. It suggested that people in between these two groups have less time and are more constrained by the demands of families, jobs, mortgages and other instruments of the economy, to challenge the status quo. The book argued the need for an urgent cultural transition in five value domains: stewardship, the economy, empowerment, purpose and solidarity. It suggested that the earliest recruits to the SEE-Change movement might be concerned and interested grandparents and adolescents.

The roundtable group had recognized that although this was a new idea, there were already many activities, groups, agencies and individuals operating in Canberra society which are attempting to engage citizens in the challenge of sustainability and that to a varying extent, these groups would share some of the objectives of SEE-Change Groups. The SEE-Change Movement was agreed to be not only about the establishment of new nodes of education and activism in the local community, but would collaborate closely with, and should build upon, activities and groups that already exist.

Early days

The early developmental process was energized by two groups of three senior social work students who undertook a training placement with the SEE-Change Steering Group and by a SEE-Change “intern” in his late teens who worked at involving householders in three suburbs, as well as fellow students in the local colleges in a consideration of their “ecological footprint”.

A preview screening of the Al Gore movie “An Inconvenient Truth” was held in September 2006 that was attended by 400 people of all ages and followed by a symposium of scientists and politicians. This was the first significant SEE-Change event that led to the formation of a SEE-Change Group based in three suburbs of Canberra which surround the Jamison Shopping Centre and a large social club.

In June 2007, the Australian Conservation Foundation published on its website an atlas of footprints and emissions by suburb area across the nation. (ACF Consumption Atlas 2007) The atlas revealed that the average per capita footprints (FP) measured in global hectares (ha) and the average estimated per capita CO2 emissions (in tonnes per capita per person) for the three suburbs in the Belconnen area were above the ACT average, which itself was above the national average.

This information was presented to public meetings of residents in Belconnen and Woden which agreed during 2007 to form local SEE-Change Groups. Since that time two more groups have been formed in different parts of Canberra and the Steering Group, which has overviewed the process, has become incorporated as a separate entity which now receives financial support for the ACT Government to develop an office supervised by a small paid staff to provide support for the groups, a website, membership facilities and newsletter.

Jamison

In 2007 a group of people in the Jamison area (Cook, Aranda and Macquarie) began meeting to determine how to launch a local group, with the aims of reducing the ecological footprint of the three suburbs. They organised a public meeting at Aranda School, where more than 100 people came and agreed to commit to reduce the Eco-Footprint of the suburbs by 30% by 2010. It was a big ambition and was followed soon afterwards by first meeting of the newly named Jamison SEE-Change Footprint Challenge Inc.

Solar Bulk Buy - and the Feed-in Tariff. The good, the bad and the electric.

At the time, interest in solar electricity was increasing rapidly. The Jamison group decided to organise the city's first Solar 'Bulk-Buy' and approached companies Australia-wide to bid for the job of installing solar arrays on Canberra roofs. Meanwhile, two packed public meetings at Wests Rugby Club saw more than 80 solar electricity arrays and hot water systems installed. This increased by a third the number of panels on Canberra rooftops at the time. At the same time, SEE-Change members were very vocal in their support of Mick Gentleman's Solar Feed-in Tariff and its successful introduction was in part attributed to this timely vocal support. The collapse in the Australian dollar and the financial meltdown of 2008 saw prices rise for half the group and tempers fray, but after those problems, SEE-Change has been able to go on to run two further solar bulk buys, the most recent through the faith communities at churches across Canberra.

Other Jamison projects included BERT – the Bicycle CO2 Emission Reduction Trial, where the group was successful in receiving a $10,000 grant to purchase bike trailers. The idea was to have both children's trailers and cargo trailers for hire to encourage them to take the bike on short journeys. This is still running and more information can be found on our website. The other entirely new idea, was 'Sustainability in the Suburbs'. It was the brainchild of two mothers at the local school who wanted to create a space for learning about ecological footprint issues, that fitted into a busy life with young children. The key was the fact they provided dinner – locally sourced and home-cooked and after school care – whilst the parents heard speakers on subjects from climate change, to water harvesting in the back garden, bike repairs and the CPRS.

Woden

In November 2007, 70 people from five suburbs in the Woden Valley attended a public meeting to support a proposition that we in the five suburbs represented (Torrens, Curtin, Lyons, Pearce, Chifley) reduce our ecological footprint by 30% over the next three years. The first Woden SEE Change committee was immediately formed to commence planning and implementation activities to action this resolution.

In April 2008, Woden SEE Change became an incorporated body with the following key aims and objectives:

> "Woden SEE Change has issued its Eco Challenge, which aims to reduce the ecological and carbon footprints of the suburbs of Woden.
>
> Woden SEE Change aims to provide a focus for local action on sustainability, to inspire other communities and to motivate government leaders to demonstrate leadership in creating a future for the world's children.
>
> The specific objective of Woden SEE change is to encourage actions aimed at reducing the ecological and carbon footprints of the suburbs of Woden."

In early to mid 2008, our key activity was to develop and promote our Eco Challenge, an activity that seeks people's commitment to reduce their ecological footprint by implementing changes at the household level. The key component was to use the Australian Conservation Foundation's on-line eco calculator to calculate household

footprint and identify three actions that would be implemented over 12 months to reduce the footprint.

In July 2008, the Woden SEE Change committee launched the Eco Challenge at a public meeting attended by close to 100 people. While there was some interest and uptake of the Eco Challenge, it became apparent in late 2008 that the majority of people attending Woden SEE Change events are more interested in learning how to reduce their ecological footprint via workshops, practical demonstrations, tours of homes and gardens and networking with others in their community and do not see a need to make a commitment to such activities in any formal way.

Since late 2008 to June 2010, Woden SEE Change has been addressing our community's interest in community learning to address our ecological footprint via a 2008-09 ACT Environment Grant. The funding we have received has allowed us to bring monthly workshops and 'over the back fence' tours to the Woden and Weston Creek area. These events have addressed each aspect of our ecological footprint including energy use, water use, transport, food production, consumption patterns, and waste management. To complement these activities we have conducted monthly social eco-chats at the Southside Farmers Markets. We are hopeful that these eco-chats can become an event for many to look forward to extend their knowledge and circle of people that can be drawn on for practical and moral support in making changes in our lives to reduce our ecological footprint.

In 2010, our community learning workshops, seminars and tours have continued and extended into what we have called skill sharing workshops. This is where, a practical activity is conducted mainly in people's homes. Our skill sharing workshops follow the seasons and reflect people's interests in, for example, reducing their energy bills, using local produce and increasing their own backyard food production. So far this year, we have conducted skill sharing workshops on fruit preserving and jam making and sealing and caulking your home in preparation for winter. These events have been immensely popular and highlight people's great interest in learning new skills and sharing prior knowledge and skills with others. The skill sharing workshop concept draws on the success of groups such as Permablitz, which bring a willing group of workers together, to action a planned activity.

We have measured our success over the last year or so through attendance levels at our events and evaluation feedback from attendees. It is evident that there is a strong appreciation of Woden SEE Change activities and a willingness to participate and exchange ideas on how to revive older traditions in the area of home food production for example or to learn from others in how to reduce our ecological footprints. There is an ever-increasing group of people interested in Woden SEE Change activities. Our regular contact list started at approximately 50 people in early 2008 and is now well over 300.

Since late 2007, important groundwork has been laid at Woden SEE Change for continued growth in our activities. We have the basis for increased networking and learning amongst members and workshop participants through the SEE Change website (www.see-change.org.au), which allows blogs and on-line forums. These forums will, it is hoped, extend workshop learnings and friendships beyond a single event and we are hopeful that stronger links between people will be made as they continue to come along to our events.

Inner North

The Inner North group made it clear from the start that they didn't want the formal responsibilities of Incorporation, a path both Jamison and Woden had followed. Jamison has since de-incorporated and we expect future groups won't bother formalising themselves in that way either. Now SEE-Change Inc provides the umbrella of support,

for services – such as maintaining the website and membership systems, to providing insurance and the legislative backing for grant applications.

The Inner north group commenced 12 months of talks with particular emphasis on retro-fitting of homes, hearing from experts as well as sharing their own experiences. For example, a number of members on one of their talk nights spoke about their different experiences with double-glazing and window dressings. They were also able to provide dinner and childcare. Their big achievement last year was to co-organise the first Inner North Community Fair to launch the local Wetland Project. 3000 people turned up on the day. It was in fact so successful that a key member of the group was hired 9 months later by the ACT Government to organise a follow-up Fair at the next Wetlands site in Dickson.

Inner South

Each group is completely different, depending on the interests and capacity of their members and Inner South is primarily interested in policy direction and developing connections with the local community. They have written submissions on the Urban Forest renewal, on the ACT Government's Sustainable Energy Policy, and have decided to take things slowly and see how they develop.

Executive Officer, the office and the central collaborative committee.

In May 2009 the ACT Government announced SEE-Change would receive four year recurrent funding. This was welcome news and meant the organisation now had a strong foundation from which to plan. Until then we had been relying on small one-off grants to pay the Executive Officer and cover all costs, including insurance, rental, events and website costs. Another staff-member was hired and we could finally purchase banners, flyers, and useful material for all of the stalls our members attend across the city on a regular basis.

The central office also provides support for the groups by way of organising publicity, sending out regular mailings to members, running the membership system and supporting the website. The Executive Officer also attends meetings on behalf of SEE-Change, negotiates with the Government, takes media calls, and contributes to other campaigns, such as the Love 40 campaign. And the SEE-Change Inc committee, the central collaborative committee which employs the staff, also provides policy advice, applies for Grants and Tax Deductability on behalf of the organisation, and is the link for all groups to meet and find out about the activities of the other groups. This inter-connectedness is a work in progress and we are constantly looking at ways we can improve the links between the groups, which have much in common and much to teach each other.

Annual Review Day

SEE-Change has been reviewing the successes and failings of the burgeoning organisation since its inception. We hold a day-long Review Day and have recently added a convivial dinner for members and families, with an emphasis on local food (BYO), and inspiring entertainment. At the 2009 Review Day we created the Vision and Mission Statements, and wrote a 1-page business plan, with the help of a team of professional facilitors. This was a significant achievement and has helped clarify our main aims and intents. Our Vision is 'Communities creating a sustainable Canberra', and our Mission 'To inspire, inform and Support action to reduce Canberra's Ecological Footprint'.

The Newsletter

The newsletter started with a bang as one of the Jamison members was a graphic designer and cartoonist, and he was already doing it for the local Australian Solar Energy Association. It is about to be re-launched as a bi-monthly affair, with links to our

website and a youth focus, by a member who is also studying through the ANU Fenner School.

Internships

We have benefited from the Australian Catholic University Social Work Internship program for the last few years, through their Community Development program. For the last three years out of four we have been fortunate enough to have three interns for three months of the year each. They have been instrumental in helping us form new groups, run focus groups, conduct research into community barriers, and support the existing groups, as well as spreading the word about SEE-Change in their communities. We have started Jamison, Inner North and Woden this way, and are optimistic we will be able to continue this fruitful relationship into the future. We are very pleased to say that one of our former students actually supervised our three most recent students. We believe this is community building in practise. We have had our successes, but also our failures. In the year we supported one student only, she attempted to start a group in the Tuggeranong area, however it was difficult to create the impetus needed to form a cohesive group and we are still yet to make an impact in Tuggeranong.

A good home

SEE-Change's office moved from the Canberra Environment Centre to the Downer Community Centre for a more permanent home. The centre has five large rooms and a courtyard – perfect for hosting events, talks, workshops and dinners and the first big event was the Review Dinner – where forty active members ate locally-sourced food, mulled wine and ruminated over the successes of the pervious 12 months. This was followed by the annual Review Day

Challenges for the next phase of our development

The future evolution of SEE-Change will depend on grassroots community interest, support and action in relation to sustainability issues. Our aim is to help to transform ACT society and its ecological and carbon footprints very rapidly.

Progress in the transition to sustainability to this point has depended upon the activities of a number of highly motivated, energetic and well-informed individuals, who still constitute a relatively small proportion of the ACT population.

If the kind of change that is required is to occur, a much larger proportion of the population needs to engage with the footprint challenge. It is clear from surveys that the majority of Canberrans now recognize the seriousness of the climate change threat. But many remain confused about the most constructive way forward.

Our aim in SEE-Change is to work with other groups to engage all residents of Canberra in an understanding of the challenges outlined above, while also promoting new opportunities for them to take action. This will necessarily mean, reaching them in their existing regional and neighbourhood networks and activities which tend to be built around schools, faith groups, clubs, sporting, hobby, entertainment and recreational groups, service clubs, U3A, and local streets and neighbourhoods.

As well as developing events and information exchange opportunities within existing local SEE-Change groups, and developing new identifiable groups in other parts of Canberra, there is also a need for this sustainability transition to be embedded into all of Canberra's networks. For this reason, SEE-Change Inc has created a new corporate category of membership, which is open to faith groups, schools, businesses, and community agencies which share the aims of SEE-Change Inc.

Conclusion

Four years after its launch, The Canberra SEE-Change Movement has become a recognisable presence on the ACT scene. Growing numbers of people are engaged in a range of community and neighbourhood activities aimed at reducing their own ecological footprints. There is growing interest in food choice as a means of reducing our ecological footprints and considerable interest in installation of solar panels and retrofitting houses to be less demanding of energy. But the city's CO2 emissions are still rising and we remain a society that is deeply committed to consumption. The real challenge of sustainability remains .