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Sustainability seeks ultimately to maintain and enhance quality of life and life opportunities in our diverse communities, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally.

UTS Shopfront 2001

Sustainable development calls for improving the quality of life for all of the world's people without increasing the use of our natural resources beyond the earth's capacity. While sustainable development may require different actions in every region of the world, the efforts to build a truly sustainable way of life require the integration of action in three key areas—economic growth and equity, conserving natural resources and the environment, and social development. Throughout the world people require jobs, food, education, energy, health care, water and sanitation. While addressing these needs, the world community must also ensure that the rich fabric of cultural and social diversity, and the rights of workers, are respected, and that all members of society are empowered to play a role in determining their futures.

**United Nations Department of Public Information 2001, Johannesburg Summit 2002
World Summit on Sustainable Development**

Foreword

Women, Partnerships and Sustainable Development is the product of a valuable set of partnerships. Together the women and organisations in three NSW communities—Dareton on the Murray in the south-west, Nowra and Ulladulla in the Shoalhaven, and Miller in south-west Sydney—the University of Technology Sydney (UTS) Shopfront, and the Department for Women, have been able to identify the pivotal role women play in developing local solutions to local issues.

The report teases out the processes and outcomes which underpin sustainable economic, social, cultural and environmental development for women in remote and regional communities. It highlights the imagination, courage, skill and determination of women as they build futures for themselves and their communities through a process of sustainable development.

Contained within the report is a set of principles necessary to inform the engagement of government with women and communities and the parameters for effective and sustainable interventions. In particular, it recognises the significant role women play in the regeneration and renewal of their communities through their leadership and community participation. The principles articulate the ways in which we need to work if we are to build relationships that will allow for sustainable partnerships that effect change in the lives of women and those around them.

Two of the key components that informed the way in which UTS Shopfront developed the partnership project provide the cornerstone for our thinking about sustainable development for women. One was a commitment to the process which allowed us to work within the temporality and complexity of the women's lives, priorities,

commitments, knowledge and analysis. It built the basis of a sustained engagement.

The second was a recognition of the multiplicity and diversity of women and of their communities. This enabled sets of conversations to occur across difference which led to shaping multiple responses to women's concerns. We did not attempt to deliver single or comprehensive solutions to problems. Its purpose and aim was to work with women in establishing the pathways to building sustainable futures.

The Department for Women is committed to women's leadership and to ensuring that women fully participate in community renewal and strengthening initiatives. We are also committed to respecting cultural diversity within and reconciliation between women. The project's approach is closely aligned to these commitments.

This project was the product of an innovative partnership grant funded through the NSW Department for Women's Grants Program. I believe that the outcomes from the project make a substantial contribution to our body of knowledge in the area of sustainable development. I hope the report will stimulate thinking and engender practice that actively engages women as they work to build their communities of place and interest.



Robyn Henderson,
Director General, Department for Women

Introduction

Building sustainability is imperative for both communities and government policy objectives. The interconnections between economic, social, cultural and environmental development are recognised as critical in building sustainable futures.

The Partnership Project on sustainable development for women was the first of what is now an ongoing commitment by the Department for Women to fund partnership projects under the Women's Grants Program. The 2000 Women's Grants Program Partnership Project recognised the United Nations International Year for the Culture of Peace with its focus on respect for cultural diversity and the promotion of cooperation, dialogue and reconciliation. It also recognised that local solutions are best applied to local issues, and that strong communities are more able to meet the needs and concerns of their members. The Partnership Project was awarded to UTS Shopfront (University of Technology, Sydney).

The project was to design a framework for sustainable economic, social, cultural and environmental development for women in remote and regional communities, and to consider those aspects that would strengthen and support women's initiatives at a grassroots level. The project took place in three areas of NSW—Nowra and Ulladulla in the Shoalhaven on the south coast, Dareton on the Murray River in the south-west and Miller in south-west Sydney.

The work was framed by the social justice principles of equity, access and rights—and by a philosophy of reconciliation and respect

for diversity. The methodologies employed were situated at two collaborative edges. The first was action based, i.e. 'doing and thinking'. The second involved government and the community working together, especially in the areas of planning and policy making.

There were a number of subsidiary dimensions to the overall aim of the Partnership Project. These involved:

- establishing and developing frameworks through 'doing'—by initiating sustainable activities or by shadowing existing sustainable activities among women
- bringing women from diverse cultural and socio-economic backgrounds together through activities
- providing an overview, with the assistance of UTS student projects, of existing literature on:
 - regional and remote Australia and women
 - community, community development and governance
 - sustainability and strategic models for sustainable development among women
- initiating specialist UTS student projects in core thematic areas
- exploring the possibility of developing linkages among the activities in the three communities and providing templates for these where possible
- exploring options for community/university forms of retreat, education and training.

In the first instance, fellowships would be offered to key women in each community. From the beginning the shape of the fellowships was

subject to the wishes and needs of women who acted as catalysts in each area.

The project worked through a collaborative community development process. Partnerships and local community ownership informed the working process. Rural and regional economic and social change—and the location of regional and remote communities in a globalised economy—provided one layer of context for the project, as did the need to build strength and renewal for Aboriginal women and their communities.

The Partnership Project focused on:

- the intersection of government and the community
- 'how to do' as much as 'what to do'
- collective as well as individual benefit
- the strengths of women rather than their deficits
- the enhancement of the quality of life for women experiencing disadvantage as the baseline of sustainability
- frameworks developed from 'the ground up' in dialogue with local women.

UTS Shopfront worked extensively in each of the areas—becoming familiar with the communities, and developing and building relationships that were fundamental to the success of the project. Five research projects were completed, each addressing a particular barrier facing women in remote and regional communities. This work was used to identify generic themes developed with each of the communities. Community profiles were also compiled.

The Partnership Project provided a catalyst for the emergence of new ideas and planning, nurturing projects and activities and setting up linkages and models of support. Women in each locality identified projects that would contribute to strengthening their capacity to build

sustainable communities. These projects would also facilitate their participation in the development and renewal of their communities. Networks and women's organisations were established, supported and strengthened—and links were made to sustain local activities. Training pathways were modeled. One economic and cultural development initiative was identified in each area. Individual projects secured wide ranging local and regional support and involvement.

A number of projects were 'incubated' through the process:

- An Aboriginal women's artist and craft studio and cultural development project, Originality, was initiated in Nowra.
- The Dareton Aboriginal Women's Network (DAWN) was established and strengthened. It built a supportive structure for participation and designed initiatives that would contribute to community economic and cultural development.
- Women in Ulladulla identified the potential for women to lead a vision for the economic and cultural future of the coastal town.
- The imagery and narratives of women's lives in Miller formed the basis of a media project with young women, and for the development of a production house for film and photography.



Community fellowships

A fellowship was offered to each community, providing an opportunity for women to step back from their work in the field and reflect on their practice. Through this process participants were able to design a program and prepare an implementation plan that effectively addressed issues of concern in their communities.

The fellowship for Dareton was awarded to Raeleen Berriman who, following consultation with the Elders of the community, undertook research into the impact of suicide on young people in the community.

The three artists involved with the Originality project in Nowra—Cheryl Strickland, Marilyn Smart and Marie Carter—were awarded a fellowship. They went on a fact finding tour to visit successfully established Aboriginal arts and cultural centres in coastal and regional NSW.

Young women from Miller were mentored and trained by Therese Sweeney, a local photographer and filmmaker who also received a fellowship. Therese developed a video and photography course and supported the young women in making short documentaries. One of the films went on to win the award for the under 18 category at the Penrith Valley Film Festival.

Each of the fellowships captured the essence of the tasks for women in the communities and created material for sustainable outcomes. The Dareton research will form the basis for the development of a suicide prevention plan for the Aboriginal community. The artists working on the Originality project will have gathered together the information they need to establish their studio. The video project in Miller—which already has young women keen to continue—resulted in the establishment of a model for effective and creative training that is locally based and culturally specific and representative. It also identified the potential for the establishment of a film production house.

Principles

A set of principles to inform local interventions and sustainable development was produced. The principles were derived from a methodology that was:

- action based and reflective of the community development process and engagement with women in the three communities
- provisional, allowing for the specificity and cultural nature of each locality
- dialogical (allowing terminology and principles to be negotiated from 'the ground')
- derived from intensive sets of social and working relationships in each locality
- carried out through distinct interconnecting stages:
 - preparation, research and familiarisation with the communities
 - the establishment of a process for engaging with each locality
 - working with women, working through the issues and building options for sustainability with each community
 - exiting.

The methodology also worked at three levels:

- with women on the ground
- with local public, community and private sector organisations
- with regional/state/national public, non-government and private sector organisations.

The principles reflect a working process that identified and took account of a number of factors that in turn affect the sustainability of women's participation in local development, and in managing and generating change.

In particular, the project gave consideration to:

- the nature and importance of social relationships—both those within and across communities of place and of interest, and between the project team and the women and organisations within each locality

- the barriers to women’s participation and communication, and the importance of developing structures and capacity to engage with each other and with communities and networks across regions and interests

(Participation is not reliant on structures alone. It is also dependent on the sense of strength and capacity that women experience of themselves and each other.)

- the distinctiveness and cultural nature of each locality and the diversity within communities

(Principles rather than ‘a framework’ for sustainable development were devised in part to reflect and honor the diversity and difference within and across communities. Local distinctiveness also provides the strengths and resources that women build on in developing sustainable futures for themselves and their communities.)

- the interconnection between cultural and economic, together with social and environmental development.

(Women in each locality identified initiatives that they saw as the basis for sustainable development in which the interconnection between cultural and economic development was crucial for community renewal and regeneration.)



The Partners

UTS Shopfront

UTS Shopfront is a university wide program established by the University of Technology, Sydney in 1996. It is designed to link disadvantaged and under resourced community groups to university skills, resources and professional expertise. This allows projects that would not otherwise proceed to be completed with multiple benefits.

It was founded on the dual commitment of meeting community need and developing an innovative and practical approach to learning. In the five years the Shopfront has been working with community organisations 200 projects have been completed. These projects involved students, academics and all of the University’s faculties .

UTS Shopfront’s vision is to maintain and further advance the principles of flexible learning through developing collaborative research, teaching and learning activities based on a culture of equity, diversity, social responsibility and mutual respect.

UTS Shopfront has consolidated partnerships with disadvantaged and under resourced community groups with a view to fostering self-determination, skill transfer and an educational program that will produce university graduates with knowledge of socially responsible professional practice.

Department for Women

The Department for Women is a key agent in improving the economic and social well being of women by generating benefits from the Government and other sectors. Its focus is on women with limited access to social and economic resources, reflecting the Government’s commitment to social justice. The Department’s ongoing work gives effect to the strategic

objectives of the Beijing Platform for Action and the Convention on the Elimination of all Forms of Discrimination against Women. The Department has a whole of government approach. Its corporate objectives are achieved through research and policy, and through strategic partnerships and projects that deliver tangible and sustainable results for women.

The Partnership Project was informed by the Department's corporate objectives for the promotion of:

- sustainable development for women
- participation—including decision making—by women in political, social, economic and cultural spheres
- access to and successful outcomes for women through learning and life skills.

Women in the three communities

The three communities participating in the project were very different in almost all significant criteria—demographic, cultural, geographic (actual and imaginary), political, religious and economic—and were representative of:

- fringe urban regional centres (Miller in Western Sydney)
- rural coastal regions with in-migration of 'lifestyle' professionals and of ex-Sydney working class people who were victims of recession (Ulladulla and Nowra in the Shoalhaven)
- remote rural towns (Dareton in Wentworth Shire, which is also a *border town*)
- villages with populations that include highly skilled, ex-city professional women, businesswomen and unskilled or semi-skilled women (Ulladulla in the Shoalhaven).

Methodology

Rationale for the methodology

The methodology was developed to facilitate working *with* rather than *for* local women. It was derived from methods of action based research. It was qualitative, participatory, explorative and designed to meet the aims of the Partnership Project.

These included a philosophical commitment to:

- collaborative work with local women
- working through processes organic to the women in the community so that the activities arose *from* the community
- embedding collective activities in women's lives
- local ownership of the activities
- sustainability.

Summary of methodology

The conceptual link between community development and cultural work informed the methodology. As discussed in the background section, the concept of community is much debated and the methodology drew on practices that aim to maintain an openness to the patterns of relationships found in localities, neighbourhoods and communities.

During the process 'culture' and 'community' were separated to make space for the different conceptual and experiential realms that both address. This was accomplished by working with cultural practices, aesthetics and memories, and developing these with open ended democratic ideals. This was particularly important in localities with highly mobile populations, or with populations where cultural identifications and networks crossed local boundaries.

The methodology was action based and involved working intensively with women in and across each locality. Substantial periods of time were spent in each area working and mixing with local women to ensure participation and collaboration. All decisions were discussed with participants and channels of communication were left open.

Four-stage methodology

1. Preparation

This preparatory stage involved the collection and review of literature on key concepts of the Partnership Project and the preparation of background material on organisations, activities and contacts at each level of the field work (local, shire, regional, state). Local studies of each area were developed and individuals and stakeholders were identified.

2. Entry

This initial familiarisation period entailed extending the rough cultural map of each locality, meeting and briefing sessions and getting people used to seeing the partnership team in the community. The familiarisation period also included driving out to adjacent towns, shires and major regional centres.

3. Working with the communities

This stage involved a series of visits that sought to:

- define activities, processes and goals with women in each area
- define the Partnership Project role in relation to activities
- facilitate participation in local formal and informal events
- develop trust

- initiate the community fellowship scheme.

Through this stage projects and activities were identified, strategies for building women's participation devised, support structures identified and elements for sustainable development determined.

4. Exit period

It was essential that exit from the projects was gradual. Some aspects of the projects were necessarily ongoing. Others, such as the community fellowships, had to be finalised. One of the outcomes from the Partnership Project is a set of working relationships and local initiatives that is sustaining women's participation, and building on the set of principles and working methodology devised through the project as a whole.

Comments on the process

Working with women in each of the three localities of the Partnership Project was extremely labour intensive. It took time to get to know people and to get a sense of their lives. The rural areas had virtually no organised activities that fitted the Partnership brief and activities had to be developed from the ground. It also took time for women to work through the idea of building on their strengths rather than seeking responses to immediate welfare needs, and to identify sustainable outcomes.

There were also risks involved in the methodology. For example, the process might prove inappropriate to a locality, activities might collapse through internecine conflicts at the local level, or failure to get a project off the ground would reinforce the

low self-esteem of many women. On the other hand, the openness of the process recognised and respected difference within and across communities, and allowed discussion across and between women and groups to build a matrix of possibilities.

Modifying the methodology

The collaborative nature of the methodology meant that it was subject to change if required by the communities. Consequently the methodology itself became a learning process for the Partnership Project.

The original plan to move into the field through three levels (state/regional/local), commencing with the broadest level, had to be abandoned. The reality was that the project had to move very early into the local areas and later into the other levels.

Every area was very different and the methodology was modified to local contexts.

The experience of serendipity was a major part of the process. It opened up new opportunities and connections.

The combination of time factors and the pressures in rural areas on government and community sector workers, as well as the rigours of people's daily lives, meant that a carefully staged plan could not be rigidly applied.

The timing and content of the community fellowships had to be revised to accommodate the participants.

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Department for Women

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A WOMEN'S GRANTS PROGRAM PARTNERSHIP PROJECT