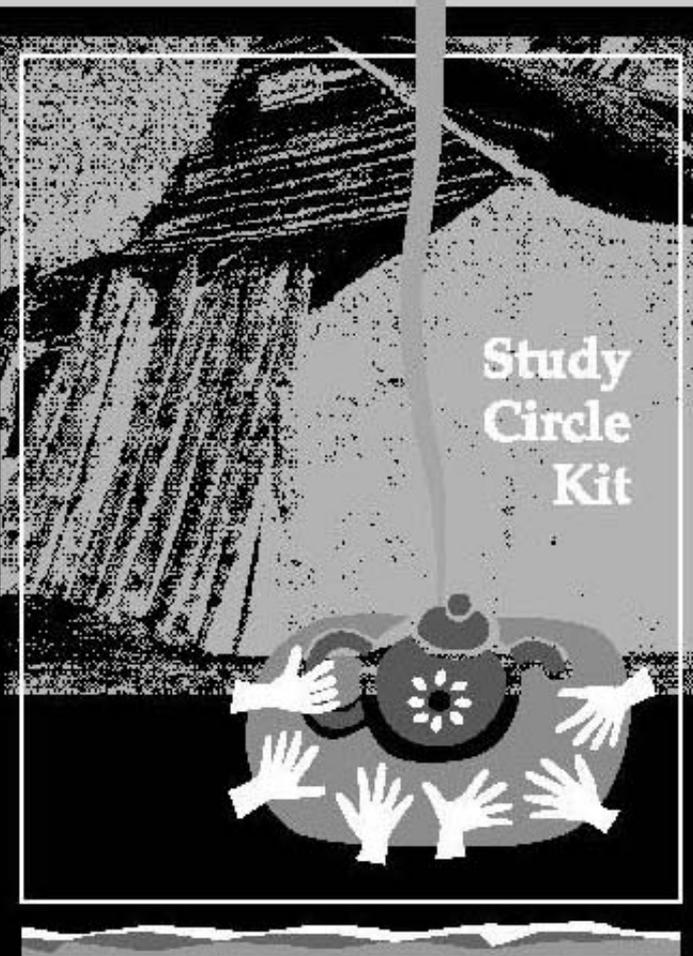


# BUILDING RURAL FUTURES

## THROUGH CO-OPERATION

The vision is  
"thriving  
communities  
able to care  
for people  
and the  
places in  
which they  
live".

Study  
Circle  
Kit



Produced by the Centre for Rural Communities Inc.  
in partnership with the Co-operative Federation of  
Victoria Ltd. and Co-operative Energy Ltd.



*A journey of learning*  
*From rural Gippsland, to Madrid,*  
**3rd Rural Women's Congress**

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At a gathering such as this there will be many different stories explaining why women chose to make this journey to the 3<sup>rd</sup> World Rural Women's Congress in Spain. This contribution shares one of the threads of how women's collaborative style of engagement is now being recognised as an essential contribution to sustainable regional development in my region of Victoria, Australia. **(Map 277,000 people)**

The story begins in 1985 in my home region of East Gippsland. Like most classic stories my life was proceeding along familiar and known paths. I'd recently married and moved to this rural area, had two small children and was involved in everyday activities surrounding building a home, feeding the family and getting to know the community. Then something happened to change how I viewed the world and my place within it that has motivated my involvement in adult learning ever since.

**Experience of collaborative learning**

This life changing experience was involvement in a rural women's study group that focused on issues local women shared in common. The group I was involved with was one of 35 local groups across the Gippsland region that met in local halls or people's houses providing local access, child-care and required no fees or academic work. These factors overcame traditional access barriers for rural women all positive steps (Clarke 1984). But more than this, there was no set content of learning. Instead the course provided a process for women to discuss decision-making areas of their life. To determine how health, education, employment and lifestyle supported or limited women's development (Brophy 1985).

**From silence to conversation**

I was involved in a group where women tentatively began to share experiences of miscarriages at the time of the year when aerial spraying of vegetables occurred along the river flats. Three women in the group had all experienced miscarriages at this time at different stages of their pregnancy. Each woman had experienced this loss in isolation and grieved alone. The forum provided a safe place to speak of these experiences and other women related stories of how their children had diarrhea at this time and became sick or their husband's, usually passive folk became aggressive. One diary farmer told of the farm's milk being rejected by the milk-company due to the high levels of pesticides. Through the sharing of these experiences, other women who had concerns also began to come along to the group and the identified topic for further study became the effect of sprays and chemicals on our families and ourselves.

### **Becoming informed**

Group members began to request information from local authorities and questions of content of sprays used, safe handling practices and accountability for used containers became local issues, awareness increased. Discussions were held with local doctors and contact made with women in other areas with similar issues. Through networks local women became involved in submissions to the federal government on HAZARDOUS CHEMICAL signage and safer handling practices along with the collection of unused farm chemicals.

### **Personal and community development**

Private concerns became public action for change from within each of the 35 groups. Each group identified their own issues and similar motivation to engage in learning relevant to their lives became evident across Gippsland. Women developed the skills, confidence, language and contacts, which led to further research and exploration of solutions to issues of concern. Dynamic learning supported by a regional network, newsletters and festivals that continued over the following 16 years originated from this collaborative learning with rural women funded for a 3-month period. This pilot program was not refunded and mainstream educational institutions did not understand how to incorporate this style of learning into mainstream curriculum. However the experience remained, and began my journey to discover if this dynamic learning could be extended to other areas.

### **Indicators of change**

Dynamic women's programs have continued to emerge in Gippsland that have been influenced by this collaborative style of learning. At a State level there had been involvement by workers in the Office of Rural Affairs and the emerging Rural Women's Network (Mitchell in Franklin et. al. 1994: 142). Workers within this state Government department understood the inter-disciplinary nature of rural events and the significant role of rural women, particularly in times of crisis and change. The network developed as a resourceful and interactive organisation with the ability to communicate directly with Ministers across the range of portfolios relevant to regional communities. The strategies were not dependent on direct involvement: rather they encouraged independence and diversity while building on existing organisations.

### **Strategies of the Victorian Rural Women's Network**

The Rural Women's Network had four key roles that facilitated rural women's involvement in decision making that impacted on their lives. The first of these was to listen to rural women and identify issues of concern and develop ways to respond. The second was that of networking, creating links for rural women to access information, contacts and resources. The most well known strategy to achieve this was the production of the NETWORK newsletter, while the area rural women were least aware of was the workers role of contributing information to government for policy development which would improve the lives of rural women. (Bailey et. al. 1996. 166)

In practice these tasks became:

- the publication of NETWORK newsletter with 85% of content written by rural women,
- the holding of gatherings on topics of common interest to women,
- the regular invitation to rural women to participate in a reference group to the workers of the Office of Rural Affairs,
- participation by workers in the Rural Affairs Committee of Cabinet as well as providing direct access to Ministers and advisors for rural people. (1986 - 1992)

Seemingly simple strategies, they facilitated interaction with policy makers and planners whose lifestyle and experiences were frequently insulated from the reality of decisions they made for rural people.

Reading of the newsletter by rural women provided a means to share experiences that had often been isolated. Other women wrote back offering their solutions or support. The network expanded and the experience became one of public interest. Policy makers read of these experiences and had reality to build on rather. Through these strategies a forum was established without hierarchy and with access to decision-makers. Let me give an example from my own experience as a rural educator.

Following the experience of learning spoken of earlier, Gippsland women tried to gain support for the continued employment of feminist educator Helene Brophy who had introduced this collaborative style of learning. Working through the Department of Education brought no joy at all. The learning did not fit identified target areas of learning, or industry demand. The barriers were seemingly endless, and some originated from our own ignorance of not being able to name what we had experienced. At this time we had no language to describe what had been so different and led to such dynamic engagement.

In frustration one evening sitting by my fire in Cabbage Tree Creek I wrote a poem to NETWORK (NETWORK 1986). After publication, responses came from other rural women, with whom I kept in contact for many years, from organisations in three other states in Australia with requests to reprint the poem for their organisations. Contact was also made from within Department of Education offering a way to employ Helene for a further 12 months. The NETWORK newsletter gave a voice to concerns and interests of rural women across Victoria and made public the richness and reality of their lives.

This is one story of the hundreds that changed public understanding about rural women. Stories that challenged the myths about rural women being the sleeping partner in farming, that educated of the resourcefulness of rural women, that opened people's eyes to the partnerships that could be established, locally, regionally, nationally and internationally. It is from support of the Rural Women's Network that the 1<sup>st</sup> International Women's Conference was held in Melbourne in 1994. Other women from Gippsland attending the Conference are speaking of the profile of rural women on this international forum that has led to this 3rd Congress of Rural Women in Spain.

### **Co-operation with Spain**

While I have come to the Congress to share experiences that originated in the practice of rural women's program in the 1980's and 1990's I have also come to learn about the collaborative strategies used by other countries and in particular Spain. For pressures associated with privatization, centralization of resources and the combined impact of these policies have caused great distress within our rural communities. As women from Europe would be aware the changes that have come with the establishment of the European Union are strengthened if there is that would co-operation with others involved in similar activity or production (Lewis 2000).

In this regard Spain is far more advanced in terms of co-operative legislation, taxation and experience across regions than in Australia. With these advantages there would appear to be greater understanding of constructive ways of working with regional diversity and autonomy as well as the 2<sup>nd</sup> tier co-operatives that support the establishment and development of co-operative ventures. Therefore the Congress brings together for me two areas of my research: rural women and co-operative development. A wonderful opportunity to meet and talk with others also interested in these complimentary areas.

### **Local resourcefulness**

In my experience communities with a history of working together responded to the changes of centralization of banking, health services, schools and tertiary education through local resourcefulness. Local people became involved in establishing new ventures in finance through community banks and credit unions, in the provision of health services through health co-operatives or alliances with other organisations. Agricultural groups also formed co-operatives and a feature of this time in Gippsland was the emergence of community newspapers and community radio as people sought to maintain a voice for themselves. These experiences were inspirational to other communities and provided a glimpse of the transformative potential of relationships that recognised local responsibility for people within the places in which they lived.

It appeared timely in the mid-1990's to reflect on experiences with the rural women's programs in rural Victoria in order to identify what these programs had in common that facilitated the inclusion of local knowledge in a manner constructive for local people as well as centrally. This became the focus of research over a period of years and I identified nine strategies in common: dialogue, networking, co-operative culture, time, visioning, local community ownership, action, transformation and action (Sheil 2000: 74). The guiding framework for these strategies is drawn from the goals of community development: social justice and ecological sustainability (Ife 1995: 132).

## Collaborative Education for Transformation

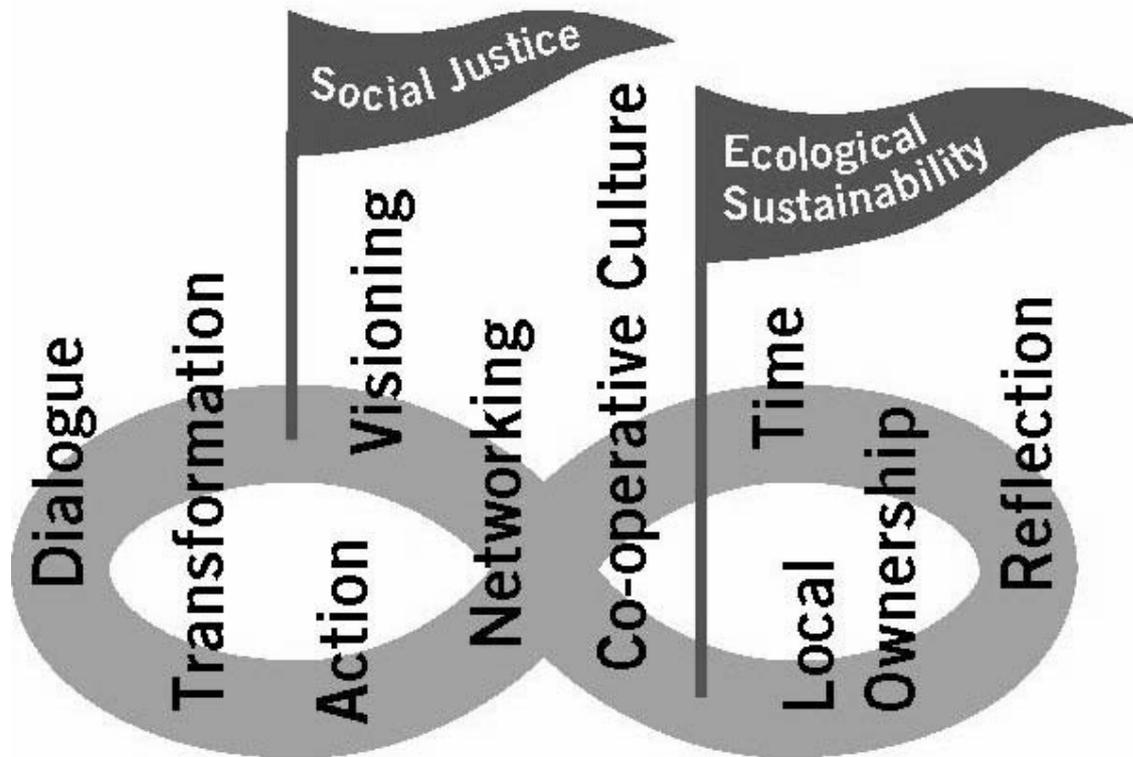


Fig 1. Collaborative Education for Transformation. (Sheil, H., 2000: 74)

Opportunity to make this work available to men and women in rural communities came through the involvement of Philanthropic Trusts that funded the development of a study circle kit: Building Rural Futures through Co-operation (Sheil 1997).

Evaluation of the changes that resulted from communities with access to this resource affirmed the importance of these strategies with results that exceeded expectation in quality and quantity. The kit enabled people within rural communities to establish a local forum, to access skills on working collaboratively, to respect rather than be threatened by difference, to make decisions that included people not divided their communities and negotiate a vision for the long term viability of their unique and diverse communities.

Each community that invested time in learning the skills to work and plan together established a legal association within their community and in 1998 began to initiative action to rebuild social, economic, environmental, cultural and political dimensions to

their community as well as become involved in personal and spiritual development. The local forums provided opportunity for people to move through a transition stage of reacting against imposed changes to leading change in directions local people identified. The importance of local knowledge in this process was a critical ingredient.

For example one community identified the local river as their major asset and began activities to reclaim damage to the riverbank following a period of drought followed by flood. The Angling Association and the Community Development Group worked together to gain funding for new pontoons, and to create a walking track and sculpture trail along the river. More people came to appreciate the beauty of this waterway and signage was put in the forest to note areas of importance. The quality of the water also became a major focus and people began to take steps to improve the water quality.

The process of working together enabled the local community to take the step of requesting a meeting with a large corporate company planning to build a pipeline across a particularly beautiful and ancient gorge on this river. A site, which marked the beginning of the walking track, constructed by the community group. The scenario of a small community association requesting a major change in location of a construction site does not often have a happy ending. But by using the skills and processes learnt in the study group this rural community of around 100 people were able to begin negotiations with the company to relocate the pipeline. It did not happen overnight, but it was achieved without dividing this community, and it was achieved without the company being cast as the enemy. After some months the company announced that they respected the rights of this community to negotiate with them, and they being good corporate citizens had after consideration and research altered their plans.

Each community can relate important growth and capacity in their ability to implement strategies to rebuild their community that continue at the time of writing some 4 years later. For the step by step approach of educating of establishing a collaborative learning environment affirmed the experiences of local people who continued to meet and learn together. As they became more confident that others were keen to learn more about their communities broader networks have been established providing greater access to access further ideas and resources.

### **Professional Development Manual**

Another important outcome of this research was the awareness that the kit alone achieved very little. A key resource was the availability of a skilled and trusted facilitator able to bring together people with different views of the world. Philanthropic groups once again funded the development of an educational resource: a professional development manual. *Growing and Learning in Rural Communities* (Sheil 2000).

### **Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development**

To support understanding of this important work a Graduate Certificate in Regional Community Development through the Faculty of Education at Monash University brings together knowledge and experience of collaborative learning, community development and practice wisdom. This course incorporates the important strategies of networking establishing an inter-sectoral regional network of workers from across agriculture, local government, housing, women's organisations, enterprise

development, youth groups, environmental groups, health organisations, neighbourhood groups, adult education and community organisations involved with rural people.

Access to resources within a Regional University and to the wealth of knowledge within the disciplines of community development, regional development and collaborative learning are combined with the practice wisdom of the reality workers are dealing with on a daily basis. The responsibility of participants in this course is to become the locally based facilitators of the skills they have themselves been learning. To achieve this they utilise the study circle kit and the strategies of engagement learnt from the work with rural women.

### **A spread of learning**

It is evident that participants grow in understanding, in confidence and in their ability to collaborative support a growing wave of involvement in a collaborative manner within their communities. Initially they return saying we must just have the right people involved! But over time it becomes apparent that by establishing a safe learning environment people welcome the opportunity to work collaboratively. In time participants realise that they are able to use these skills with different groups of people with similar dramatic outcomes. By the end of the 3-month study period: groups of people consistently form themselves into a legal organisation with the support of the wider community and begin to take on responsibility for the future of their communities. The transformation is that this is no longer simply a reactive force but one that is able to lead change.

Unfortunately, for those communities without access to this resource the initial resilience that came with local people taking responsibility for ventures has in many cases led to exhaustion, and greater distrust of political and bureaucratic processes, along with divisions within the communities they had intended to strengthen. The work developed by the Centre for Rural Communities Inc. and accredited by Monash University is a step in the right direction as it provides access to skills and knowledge of collaborative learning. These are the foundational building blocks that will provide the basis of future collaborative relationships. The next challenge is to advance our understanding of implementing collaborative practices within management. To improve understanding of how to educate of co-operative management principles and practice and culture. Without this ventures began with great enthusiasm and good will rarely survive past the foundational stage before reverting to hierarchical practices that once again either exclude local involvement or work only with one section of the community.

The journey to Madrid then offers an opportunity to draw together two complimentary areas of this research: women's collaborative learning and co-operative ventures. Men and women in regional communities have welcomed the opportunity to work collaboratively, the foundations are being rebuilt within communities. At this point there is much to learn of the next step of operation and support of co-operative ventures within these communities in a sustainable manner. So this journey is embarked on with the anticipation of being able to meet with others to learn from a country that has embraced the benefits of co-operative development at a first, second and tertiary level in the interests of developing resilient regions and a less troubled world.

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