Leadership Development: Flogging a Dead Horse or the Kiss of Life for Regional Western Australia?

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Introduction

As the 1990s came to an end, regional economies and communities were confronting momentous changes. Global trends and domestic policy decisions have had a significant impact on sustainable regional development in Australia. The globalisation of trade and economic activity is increasingly testing their ability to adapt and achieve a competitive edge.

Furthermore, in the last decade a dominant neo-liberal policy agenda has been a driving factor. This has been manifested by fiscal restraint by government; minimising public expenditure; increased use of so-called market forces rather than government intervention to drive change; and devolution of responsibilities and functions from governments to the private and community sectors. The Australian Federal Government has suggested that, in the search for sustainability, greater reliance should be placed upon local populations to become more self-determining; to take responsibility for both economic development and natural resource management, and to manage their affairs within locally determined, yet globally responsive, community based decision-making frameworks. Commonwealth and State governments have tended to advocate a 'self help' approach to rural economic development and viable rural enterprises are considered the key to arresting rural decline.

Western Australian Regional Development Programs 1995-2000

Prior to the State election in February 2001, the State Government Department of Commerce and Trade administered the regional development commissions and at a more local level, was directly involved in regional development. The regional development programs the Department offered included the Project Mainstreet program, the Small Town Economic Planning (STEP) Scheme, the Rural Communities Assistance Directory, Community Wise, telecentres, and Business Enterprise Centres. None of these programs was heavily funded and usually required some community funding input. It was usually only the bigger towns and regional centres that had the human and capital resources sufficient to meet the Department of Commerce and Trade funding guidelines. Regional development commissions have been important institutions for "economic development and job maximisation" (Wheatbelt Development Commission 1995, p. 7) but the nurturing of social and specific community issues was not part of its brief. With all of the Department of Commerce and Trade programs, there is an expectation that a person, people, a group or community organisation will take the lead, co-ordinate community support and access funding sources or agencies. For many in small rural, regional and remote communities, this requires a good knowledge of local networks, time, an

understanding of the administration of community projects, knowledge of potential funding sources and the motivation to commit to community development. Where there is a lack of effective leadership, insufficient human and economic resources, a sense of defeatism or apathy (Sorensen and Epps 1996; Tonts 1999) or difficult economic circumstances in the community, effective business and economic development is less likely to materialise.

Progress Rural Western Australia

In response to the leadership aspects of the McKinsey Report (McKinsey and Company 1994), the Office of the Minister for Primary Industry; Fisheries instigated programs directed at developing local leaders and encouraging local entrepreneurship in rural and regional areas of Western Australia irrespective of community size. The first of the *Progress Rural WA* (PRWA) programs, (then known as the *Western Australian Rural Leadership* and *Community Builders Initiatives* programs) commenced in 1996 aiming to promote community initiatives that have both commercial and social benefits as well as encouraging regional collaboration and co-operation through local leadership development.

The *Progress Rural WA* project eventually consisted of seven programs, funded and overseen by a State government department (Agriculture WA) but driven and directed by regional community members. The programs were not industry specific, but aimed to capture and build the capacity of rural communities by enabling people to learn about community economic development and to be supported in their efforts to develop their communities and regions. By devolving decision-making to communities regarding their future, encouraging community promotion of local attributes and the development of community leadership, the project aimed to facilitate the development of new businesses and the rejuvenation of established businesses to take advantage of previously unforeseen business opportunities. The government department co-ordinated and funded the programs although participants were usually required to pay a portion, perhaps with some local community contribution, to promote outcome commitment. This paper will

focus particularly on the Rural Leadership programs, the *Community Builders Initiative,* the *Foundations for Leadership* courses, the *Future Leaders* courses and the *Rural Women in Leadership* courses. This paper will discuss the outcomes for all participants based on the aggregated evaluations. The programs were evaluated in terms of their development of individual and community leadership and whether they enhanced the social, economic and environmental viability of rural communities in Western Australia. Additional interviews (level 3 evaluations) were conducted with community 'end users'.

An Overview of the Rural Leadership Programs

Each of the rural leadership programs will be briefly outlined before the outcomes of the programs are discussed.

The Community Builders Initiative

Community Builders Initiative commenced in Western Australia in 1997. By 2000, more than 100 communities within the agricultural region in Western Australia had become involved. Of all the programs, the Community Builders Initiative was most directed to grass roots community development. Its intention was to equip local residents with the necessary skills, information, resources and motivation to generate community 'ownership' and development. It encouraged neighbouring communities to collaborate with each other to find ways to support and nurture business development and entrepreneurs. The development of networks across communities and regions was promoted as a way of sharing resources, experience and information. It was anticipated that communities would appreciate the parallels, recognise similar challenges and consequently build on these.

Interested participants irrespective of age, gender, experience or industry base, formed a team of up to six people from each community. Between 6 and 10 community teams with common interests and close geographical location then formed a 'cluster'. These Community teams met together monthly. The

meetings enabled shared learning and discussion about community economic challenges, opportunities and options; enhanced awareness of available resources; and the discovery of the diversity and interconnectedness of their local and regional economies. The program activities were designed to create communication networks and opportunities to explore and meet individual and community needs and skills.

The Future Leaders Program

The *Future Leaders* course was targeted at emerging leaders in their mid 20s to 40s who were keen to develop their leadership skills and wanted to make a difference. Participants had to be actively involved in agriculture or fisheries, and rural or regional communities and were usually nominated by community or government sources. Each course had a maximum of 20 participants who were required to commit to 25 days over a six month period. The participants were not from a specific region or community. The courses included high impact leadership development training, intensive skills development, interaction with industry and community leaders and case studies with a regional, national and international application. Each course included an International Study Tour, the destination of which was determined by the particular case study theme and to a lesser extent, the business and community interests of the participants.

The Foundations for Leadership Program

The *Foundations for Leadership* courses targeted potential leaders who were community and industry based and aged between 18 and 35 years. This course was more likely to draw upon people from a particular region. Each course was tailored to the leadership training needs of specific communities or industries, which was determined by the use of local steering committees and co-ordinators. Each course was six days split between three separate modules of two days and one night duration and ran within a three month period. The courses included sessions on personality types, presentation skills, team building, group dynamics, conflict resolution, problem solving skills, decision making processes, leadership styles, meeting procedures, time management and media skills.

Participants also worked in case study groups examining leadership issues within their communities or industries. Each course was supported by a group of mentors, most of whom were leaders within the industry or community who could offer advice and guidance to participants both during and following the course.

The Rural Women in Leadership Program

The *Rural Women in Leadership* course was an opportunity for rural women over the age of 40 to examine leadership issues and learn to effectively manage the many issues facing women in rural WA. The course offered the women access to training opportunities that helped them to recognise their own skills and support them in their commitment to effectively contribute to their communities and industries. In the process, it was anticipated that a network of like-minded women able to support and encourage each other in leadership endeavours would be developed. Each course had approximately 20 participants and was run over three modules of two days each. The three modules were designed to build on the skills and experiences the women already possessed and took the group through the themes of self-discovery, self improvement and self motivation. The women were also assigned to one of four case study groups. The case studies required the groups to communicate between modules and apply the skills learnt during the course. The age base was chosen because younger women had other leadership development opportunities through the *Foundations for Leadership* and *Future Leaders* courses. Women over the age of 40 are more likely to be less tied to domestic and young child rearing duties and are the demographic cohort most active in community and industry activities. Participants came from a variety of backgrounds and experiences but each shared a long term involvement in community work at local, regional or state level. They were nominated from a range of state organisations such as CWA, Regional Tourism Associations, State Sporting Associations, The Isolated Children's Parents Association and community groups.

Progress Rural WA Evaluations

The data for this study was derived from level 1 evaluations, conducted at the end of each of the *Progress Rural WA* programs and undertaken by all participants. Level 2 evaluations were conducted at least twelve months after participation in a program, providing a longitudinal data comparison. These evaluations included quantitative and qualitative responses. The author undertook level 3 evaluations in 2001 through focus groups with 'end users'. Interviewees included members of the community, sporting and service organisations, community leaders and local government employees from communities where Progress Rural WA participants had come. None of the level 3 evaluation interviewees had participated in the programs.

More than 1,600 people from throughout rural, regional and remote Western Australia have participated in courses, seminars and study tours facilitated by *Progress Rural WA*. All of the participants have been asked to evaluate their activity immediately after participation, however, due to time, distance and storage difficulties, not all of these evaluations have been kept and recorded. Approximately half of the level 1 evaluations were available for analysis. About the same number of level 2 (post 12 month) evaluations have been analysed because a number of the activities (in particular, the *Rural Women in Leadership* programs) were undertaken in 2000 and the twelve month time lapse has not occurred.

Level 1 and 2 Results

Overall, the level 1 quantitative and qualitative feedback was extremely positive and despite the different styles and presentation formats for each of the programs, the evaluations delivered very similar quantitative results. The most outstanding positive outcome for most (94 per cent) of the graduates was the expansion of their networks. It would seem that together with the other course participants and meeting with recognised industry and government leaders, greatly expanded networks served to build individual self-confidence and self-belief. This included understanding the value of team work. Importantly, it would appear that the course provided networks and contacts that enabled ideas to be explored safely, and

opportunities to understand how other leaders approach ideas and problems. The level 2 evaluations showed that critical mass was an issue for some graduates. One graduate trying to introduce changes in community perspectives and strategies typically found the experience enervating but when a community had several graduates from the programs, discussion, interest and willingness to try changes was found to be more achievable.

The personal recognition of individual potentialities was a powerful catalyst for the groups involved in the courses. Similarly the development of a public voice and presence through the courses was empowering for many participants individually, but many also stated on their level 2 evaluations, that their communities had also appreciated this development.

The results showed that although the various programs (with the exception of the *Future Leaders Program)* were presented as a community leadership course, they had the potential to lead to regional leadership. About 20 per cent of the written responses to the level 2 evaluations mentioned that they had experienced a "globalising experience".

> *Apart from the networking opportunities, this course expanded my horizons. I have always thought there were some opportunities but I needed to have the 'small town view' taken out of me. I am pretty parochial and while that is good in some situations, the region can't advance unless we compete on a national and even a global stage rather than community versus community basis. This course didn't give me the global stage but it did give me and the others an opportunity for vision and the networks and presentation skills to at least go and find out more.*
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> Foundations for Leadership participant

The qualitative responses to the *Community Builders Initiative* evaluations provided interesting insights into the dynamics of particular clusters. It would appear that having groups of diverse people, often with nothing in common but their community and the desire to promote it was sometimes difficult to manage, while in other groups, the diversity was the key to the dynamism of the group.

Comments showed that there were sometimes considerable age differences that caused unresolved disagreements. Language, personality differences, goals to be achieved and the perceived outcomes of the clusters were occasional source of disagreement. There were also instances where there was some dissonance among members when the intended goals to be achieved during the course were not properly explored or attained.The evaluations indicated that negative responses were the minority, and the overwhelming response was very positive with most participants scoring the course with above average values. Furthermore, what was a source of angst in one cluster was often the catalyst for discussion and moving forward in another. In many of the evaluations younger members valued the older participants for their community knowledge, sense of history and desire for a future of their community, while older participants viewed the younger members as the future of the towns, industries and regions.

Across all the programs overall, the few negative comments generally focused on the need for facilitation skills, stress management and the difficulties some graduates had experienced returning to their families and/or work places having undergone what can only be described as a cathartic process. Furthermore, the longer the time gap between level 1 and level 2 evaluations, the greater the likelihood of participants concerns regarding the need for course renewal or revival.

The course gave me an opportunity of a lifetime and there is no denying I certainly wouldn' t have done some things in my community without the impetus from the course. However, as time goes on, I need a fresh injection of enthusiasm and to reconnect with the group again. I think the designers of the course need to look at this.

Future Leaders participant

In summary, the participants found the programs to be of enormous value to themselves as individuals, but more particularly, in providing them with tools and sufficient knowledge and energy to initiate creative community strategies to both maintain and expand social and economic possibilities in their communities. Interestingly, approximately 65 per cent of the evaluations stated that the course had not changed participants' goals or even direction but rather had consolidated or reinforced the goals to be achieved.

Level 3 Results

Despite the design of each of the rural leadership programs being different, the evaluations and the perceived outcomes were remarkably similar. To gain a community perspective regarding the efficacy of the programs, focus groups were conducted with people in communities from throughout rural Western Australia. Participants were usually community leaders and identities such as shire councillors, members of the local telecentre, Business Enterprise Centre and community groups including sporting and service organisations. It was stipulated that each focus group participant know something about Progress Rural WA but not have participated in any of the programs. The focus groups were usually held in a central regional location in order that several local communities could gather together to discuss the outcomes of Progress Rural WA as well as the perceived benefits or costs to the communities and State. Each focus group had approximately eight discussants and lasted between one and two hours. Open-end questions were asked of the group and each discussion was recorded, transcribed and then analysed.

Usually the focus group participants knew of Progress Rural WA but could not differentiate one program from another; some knew it as 'Monty's project' (referring to Monty House, the Minister for Primary Industries; Fisheries, who was responsible for initiating and funding the programs). Shire councillors and local government employees were most likely to be familiar with specific Progress Rural WA participants and programs because very often, local councils were asked to contribute some portion of the program fees. Usually at least several focus group participants admitted that they had initially viewed Progress Rural WA with some cynicism either as a "vote catching ploy" by the Minister or "just more of the same, hot air and no action". Many of these 'cynics' admitted that because the programs had been run over several years and sufficient numbers of local people had participated, there were noticeable changes, and many hoped these were 'embedded'.

The community input accessed for the level 3 evaluations was about equally divided regarding the advantages or disadvantages associated with a program such as Progress Rural WA having such a

close link to a specific government minister. Even though the majority concedes that the programs have had wide individual and community development benefits, many felt that it is not right that a Minister should be so closely associated. Most participants agreed however, that devolving the co-ordination and management roles to people living in country Western Australia sent a strong message of political commitment to the stated outcomes of the project.

There was some discussion at four focus groups regarding the Minister's strategy to initiate Progress Rural WA without collaboration or linking with the Department of Commerce and Trade where the Regional Development Commissions were vested. Opinions were generally divided between a regret that there was not more co-operation between the two departments and consensus that these programs were more about all facets of community and not just economic and business development. Few discussants were able to immediately identify specific grants or successful applications as a direct outcome of community members participation in a Progress Rural WA program, but with some discussion, several focus groups agreed that there had been more proactive community attempts to attract funding. A noticeable outcome for many was that participation in Progress Rural WA programs had encouraged less well-known community 'leaders' to be more prominent and to overtly share the 'leadership' work roles.

> *I noticed in our community that some of the [graduates] became more visible around the place. They had always been contributors but they had never put themselves out to take charge. It's different now. They are the ones coming up with the new ideas, and they are enthusiastic and seem happy to bring new people onto committees and so on. Town experience and birthright doesn't seem to be a pre-requisite. This is also good for those of us who have been on committees for years and years. I suppose we seem to have the mortgage on 'community leadership', but the reality is we're [tired] and we do want to share it, or even pass it on.*
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> Shire councillor

There was discussion regarding the energy it took for 'new' leaders to work with 'old' leaders. Most focus group participants indicated that while community knowledge and tenure should not be eschewed, it took sensitivity and wisdom for the 'new' leaders to know how to work with the 'old' leaders. There was concern that 'old' leaders not feel redundant, but at the same time they make room for the 'new'.

It was considered by several of the focus group members from larger towns such as Geraldton and Esperance, that Progress Rural WA programs offered more to smaller towns than bigger regional centres because there had been a dearth of extension and development programs for smaller communities and that the outcomes were more noticeable. It was felt that they had less to lose by "thinking regional" whereas larger towns were less likely to give up whatever regional advantage they enjoyed. Larger centres already had more potential to offer social and cultural development than did smaller rural communities. Because Progress Rural WA programs are regionally based (with the exception of the *Future Leaders* Courses which are state wide), many of the invisible barriers and perceived threats have been broken down through frank discussion and more open communication. Furthermore, the course modules or meetings are not restricted to a particular location and move around participants' towns so communities were given the opportunity to showcase themselves while at the same time able to convey difficulties being experienced remaining a socially and economically viable community. The sharing of resources such as labour, machinery or administration duties has the potential to reduce the expenditure on some elements of individual shire budgets and free up financial resources for economic and social development projects. There are now a number of Central Wheatbelt local governments that share resources and equipment.

Overall, the sentiment at the focus groups was positive regarding the outcomes although there were some individuals who had done more than others after the completion of their course. The focus group participants felt that the outcomes for the communities of those who had graduated from a Progress Rural WA program were multi-dimensional; that graduates were usually

motivated to get more involved in the community and not only did they participate in community activities but they instigated new initiatives that had both economic and social benefits. There was concern that some graduates were empowered by the program to change their lifestyle and move away from the community. Others took the attitude that this was good so long as rural, regional and remote communities benefited in the long run through new businesses, better educated citizens or new ventures that reflected back on their previous community. The benefit cited most often was the advantages accrued from broadening the community scope to one of a regional scale and the broader networks that graduates of the programs brought to their communities.

A concern raised by every focus group was that the enthusiasm of the Progress Rural WA graduates could not last and that there should be opportunities for revitalisation and 'reconnection' for them. This has been achievable in the past through the annual Progress Rural WA conferences where networks could be maintained and extended, ideas could be tested, friendships renewed and energies revived. Some felt this was not enough, that the groups that built the social capital should be encouraged to reconvene over a longer period to revitalise and refocus in order that the vitality be sustained. Several focus group participants compared the Department of Commerce and Trade initiatives with Progress Rural WA and felt a marked long term difference was that Department of Commerce and Trade projects provided ongoing support for several years whereas Progress Rural WA hit a community with a leadership course and then left. There was general agreement that the personal and community development processes offered by Progress Rural WA focused particularly on social and cultural development which had potential to enhance economic development in many rural and regional locations in Western Australia. Overall, many felt that the different foci were of equal importance and that one should not be compromised for the other. There was general agreement that the different facets of regional development did not need to be separated.

Conclusion

Communities in traditional farming areas of Western Australia have limited diversity and have struggled against unprecedented rates of change in their industries. The emergence of strong viable enterprises and dependent rural communities, together devising strategies to change their economic, social, cultural, and/or environmental situation offers some hope for a reversal of rural decline. Ideally, the role of government is to create an environment conducive to positive change and to work in partnership with rural industries and communities to foster community development initiatives.

In the past, the traditional country town leader tended to be from an exclusive breed with a long birthright to community leadership, knowing all and doing all in a stable environment (see Dempsey 1990). However as already discussed, the last three decades have seen a severe rationalisation of all strata of rural life in Western Australia in a turbulent economic environment. Those who have survived in their country communities have usually experienced significant economic and social change (see Haberkorn *et al.* 1999; Australian Bureau of Statistics 2000). In 1998, only 16 per cent of people living in rural, regional and remote Western Australia grew up in the community they now live (Regional Development Council 1999, p. 8). These statistics indicate that rural, regional and remote populations in Western Australia are mobile and that if leadership is the key to viable and sustainable communities, new leaders and leadership styles are crucial.

The Progress Rural WA programs aimed to widen community leadership and were designed to encourage participants to be transformational leaders; to empower those around them and support them in the process of change. Each of the Progress Rural WA programs emphasised people-oriented leadership characterised by relationship building. Such relationships develop according to Burns (1978), where there is "mutual stimulation and elevation that converts followers into leaders" (p. 127). Furthermore, women and their attributes as leaders have been encouraged in all of the leadership programs developed through Progress Rural WA, but most particularly in the *Rural Women in Leadership* program.

The Progress Rural WA programs enabled participants whose commitment to their communities and industries is clear, to visualise and work towards achieving networks and leadership strategies that would enable them and those around them to have some control over the change process in a collegial and collaborative environment. The courses aimed to give them specific leadership tools and knowledge that could be used to initiate and drive community social and economic development. The community outcomes have surprised and delighted the participants, their neighbours and government. At the same time, there is evidence to show that the new businesses have been developed and established businesses revamped to take advantage of previously unforeseen business opportunities. Overall, there has been a greater sense of ownership of community outcomes and commitment to a regional future.

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