

## ARTICLE

# Social Sustainability and the Art of Engagement—the Small Towns: Big Picture Experience

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**ABSTRACT** Governments everywhere are recognising environmental sustainability as a major driver of technological and economic development—with innovative direction being found at the interface of our efforts to become more socially and environmentally sustainable. Rural communities, faced with the pressures of unprecedented change, have an opportunity to embrace the principles of sustainable development, to create a new future at the leading edge of global change—but they need help. They need both knowledge and skills to enable them to self-evaluate and strategically plan, and they need a highly motivated, creative, and coherent community to carry it through. Small Towns: Big Picture is a community development process designed to foster creative, energetic, and collaborative action by five small rural communities in central Victoria—focusing on the development of social, environmental, and economic sustainability indicators. The project brought together artists, researchers and local communities to produce a coherent and shared understanding of the sustainability issues and opportunities. This paper presents Small Towns: Big Picture, focusing specifically on the social dimension and the development of a Community Cohesion indicator through an arts-led community engagement process.

## Introduction

In June 2000 the Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities hosted Australia's first national conference on 'The Future of Australia's Country

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Towns'. It was made clear that rural Australia confronted an array of unprecedented challenges associated with economic restructure, population decline and community fragmentation, increasing environmental problems, and a host of governance and leadership issues. These challenges are presenting at a time when distrust in the political process is possibly at its lowest ebb in Australia, and when frustration, disengagement, and apathy are a common experience.

The magnitude of change is demanding a quantum shift in thinking, in the way resources are used, and in the way social and economic enterprise is organised (O. Kingma, 2003, personal communication). It is clear to a growing number of rural observers that economic security in rural areas can no longer be expected from traditional agriculture and land use practices. Nor can small rural communities rely on external companies looking for a town to call home to provide the necessary economic impetus. According to Collits (2001, pp. 32–56), many observers believe there is little government can do to help small town survival—particularly in view of the substantial forces ranged against them. Forth (2001, p. 72) went on to argue that 'the decline and ultimate demise of many smaller country towns is part of an inevitable historical process and should be accepted as such'.

It seems clear that to survive, and even prosper, rural communities will need to embrace change rather than rail against it, and adopt new forms of innovation and development which will leave very little unchanged (Keller, 2001). Communities attempting to create a sustainable future need firstly to focus on rebuilding their community cohesion—to foster highly motivated, creative responses from a community empowered to effectively respond. According to Max-Neef et al. (1991) recent preoccupation with *fixing* society by solely economic means has dampened our ability to deal forcefully and imaginatively with social, cultural, and environmental issues—and yet the economic viability and environmental sustainability of these small rural communities will largely depend on their ability to rekindle creative energies—to design imaginative solutions, turning around the social pathologies of apathy and frustration which often afflict them.

In Australia there has been much talk about the need to build community capacity, with a wide range of new government initiatives reflecting a renewed commitment to 'community' (Department of Innovation, Industry and Regional Development, 2002)—recognising the need for communities to grow and develop from the inside out. Mackay (2004) recently concluded that while communities of interest were of significant importance to our social well-being, it was the community of neighbourhoods which were critical to our social security and development. 'We have to recognise that people we are never going to agree with are part of the community in which we exist and our connections with those people are fundamental to the meaning of the word community' (<[www.ourcommunity.com.au](http://www.ourcommunity.com.au)>).

It is therefore no surprise that the concept of community capacity building has been widely linked to the concept of social capital—and the need to improve trust between people, to encourage cooperation and

collaboration, to recognise and enhance individual and organisational networks, and to foster lifelong learning (Thomas & Pepperdine, 2003; Stone & Hughes, 2002). Social capital is often referred to as the glue that holds us together.

Another topic at the fore of government thinking is the need to evaluate government and industry performance in terms of the triple bottom line (TBL)—engaging many in the search for, and development of, measurable indicators of social, environmental, and economic progress. Rural communities, like any other government or corporate entity, need effective tools for self-evaluation and strategic planning. The TBL framework, along with the concept of developing community-based indicators advocated by Salvaris et al. (2001) in their commissioned report to Premier and Cabinet on social benchmarks and indicators for Victoria, offers a way to build community through shared learning and self evaluation.

A consequence of this focus on community building is a growing recognition of the need to *genuinely* engage people in determining their own future. Some are recognising and promoting the role that the arts can play in achieving this essential engagement of people in community planning and sustainability (Hawkes, 2001; Kingma, 2003, personal communication; Mills & Brown, 2004). With cooperation and inclusiveness now the cornerstones of new approaches to sustainable development, requiring new knowledge and new strategies, cultural activities are being advocated as the key to the conceptualization and articulation of such strategies—and in making them work. According to Kingma (2003, personal communication), the arts fulfil a crucial role in these circumstances, through transmission of information, the building of relationships, and engendering broad community participation.

Given this context, the Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities set about developing a process of community engagement which would draw together the concepts of community-based indicators of sustainability, triple bottom line performance evaluation (i.e. social cohesion, ecological footprinting, and economic activity), and cultural activities as a tool of that engagement.

This paper presents the Small Towns: Big Picture project which drew together over 1500 people from five small rural communities (Dunolly, Wedderburn, Carisbrook, Talbot, and Maldon) located in the goldfields of central Victoria, university researchers, and a team of locally based artists with the aim of building a shared understanding of their progress toward sustainability.

### **The Project Outline**

Specifically, the aims of Small Towns: Big Picture were to:

- develop a suite of sustainability indicators that were meaningful at the community level;

- engage community in a process that enabled them to make use of the benchmark indicators to develop strategic community plans; and
- build a trusting and more collaborative relationship between the university and the communities.

The five small rural communities that participated in *Small Towns: Big Picture* are all within an hour's drive of the major regional centre of Bendigo—which has a rapidly growing population as people move from metropolitan and remoter areas of Victoria. The five communities are typically characterised as having an aging population, a significant loss of young people to the metropolitan areas, loss of both public and private enterprise over recent years, and a shrinking economic base. According to the ARIA (Access/Remoteness Index of Australia) all five communities are described as bounded rural localities with a population of between 200 and 999. Over the last couple of years, these communities have experienced a changing population with the in-migration of retirees and some socially disadvantaged families seeking affordable housing opportunities. While these towns have been the recipients of new government initiatives under the community-building banner, their capacity to reverse the downward economic trend is limited—but not insurmountable, particularly in light of the recent 'seachange' phenomena being experienced in coastal and rural areas over the last couple of years (Burnley & Murphy, 2004). Nonetheless, all of the five participating communities continue to struggle with limited human and financial resources.

Prior to the commencement of *Small Towns: Big Picture* the Centre for Sustainable Regional Communities had worked with these five communities for several years on a federally funded project aimed at improving economic and employment outcomes. This initial work served to highlight the need to establish a planning structure that focused on the fundamentals of community cohesion and engagement, and the need to rekindle local motivations as a precursor to the achievement of economic and employment aspirations. However, the notion of sustainability indicators and evaluation of community performance did not stimulate much community support at the outset. People couldn't see its usefulness, didn't understand the terms or concepts particularly well, and saw it as likely to take a lot of time and effort, producing outcomes of benefit only to the university. Tacit support for the ideas, however, was given—but with little to no real enthusiasm or energy for its development—not an unexpected response given the low levels of community motivation that were readily observed. As a councillor for the Goldfields Shire pointed out, 'people are already struggling with burn-out, and this project sounds like a lot of hard work for the same few people'.

At this point in the project's development, the CSRC formed an important alliance with the Cultural Development Network (CDN), whose mission it was to promote the role of the arts in community planning and engagement. Subsequently, funds were secured from a range of sources, artist briefs prepared for each of the indicator areas, and ultimately eight artists from

the local area were commissioned to work alongside the researchers and the community. The artists included a playwright [1], website developer and photographic artist [2], printmaker [3], textile artist [4], ceramicist [5], film maker [6], photographer [7], and a community artist/coordinator [8]. Subsequently, the project's name changed from a 'TBL Community Audit' to the more creative title of 'Small Towns: Big Picture'—and local interest in the project began to mount.

The project successfully produced an initial set of benchmark indicators including a community cohesion index, an energy footprint, and an economic activity indicator. Integration of the community data with the environmental and economic performance indicators is captured by the imagery of a Dashboard of Sustainability (Figure 1)—originally crafted by Redefining Progress (USA). The dashboard image depicts information in an inherently integrated way—that is, changes in one area have direct implications for another. This creates the opportunity for people to explore the connections in new and inquiring ways—enabling people to question the relationship between economic growth and community cohesion and environmental impacts. It provides communities with the ability to explore the notion that growing people first, then focusing on environmental sustainability may ultimately lead to positive changes in their economic structure and viability.

Clearly, the aim is to *increase* the community cohesion score, while trying to *decrease* the energy footprint, with the hope that improvements in these two components will lead to changes in economic activity.

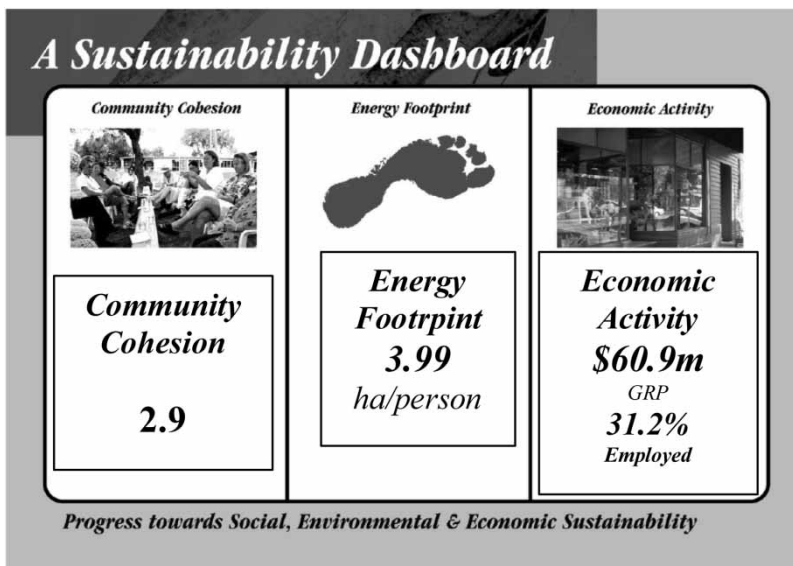


Figure 1. The Dashboard of Sustainability.

The process of Small Towns: Big Picture also produced a stunning array of artwork reflecting the nature and content of the community cohesion and energy footprint indicators—including:

- a theatrical performance reflecting issues of community cohesion: *Right Where We Are*;
- a range of artworks reflecting people's thoughts about the local impacts of climate change [9], using photography, ceramics, and printmaking as the media for creative expression;
- a website for local organization network development; and
- a 30-minute video depicting the community engagement and indicator development process.

The research findings, the artwork, and the people came together at five separate town events—each attracting an audience of 200–350 people (50% of the population), reflecting the success of the project in engaging the community in the process. As Dunn (2003), Chair of the Commonwealth Governments Women's Regional Advisory Council, commented, 'not too many social action projects, or local arts events for that matter, can boast an audience of 50% of the entire population of a town at its launch. Yet this is exactly the kind of energy this project has generated. It also actively involved young people, older people, women, men, businesses, councils and community groups which is very impressive and often difficult to achieve.'

### A Brief Comment on Indicators

While indicators are natural, everywhere, part of everyone's life, they have recently become a widely discussed instrument of change—an essential guide for us to develop sustainably. All of us use indicators to make sense of complex systems—but not everyone relates to the same indicators. Meadows (1998, p. 7) provides an example in football scores, which are only meaningful to football fans while often considered gibberish to the less enthusiastic. Similarly, a farmer can read signals from a field of growing grain which the rest of us don't perceive. Jiggles in stock prices carry vital information—but only to those who watch the market every day.

We need many indicators because there are many purposes. However, when the need for indicators is mentioned in the context of community building or local government best practice, most people seem to feel a little overwhelmed. Comments like 'How do you choose which indicators to use?' or 'There is very little point in creating your own indicators when there needs to be some universal sense made of our progress' or 'Everyone is doing *indicators*; I don't want to be recreating the wheel' are commonly heard.

The most important point about indicators is that they are 'only useful if the carried information is to a mind prepared to receive it, educated to its terms and actively engaged with the system illuminated by that indicator' (Meadows, 1998, p. 7). In other words, no matter how difficult it is to

develop community-based indicators, or how diverse they may appear to be, indicators that are not locally determined, locally validated, and locally used are of little use at the local level. As Kenny (2002) points out, monitoring and evaluation can be tools of empowerment if developed through a community process, or they can be tools of control and disempowerment if imposed by external agents for external purposes.

Max-Neef et al. (1991, p. 3) argues that our first priority is to come to terms with ourselves, ‘and in so doing, persuade ourselves that the best development we can expect, over and above any of the conventional indicators that often instil an inferiority complex in us, would be the development of communities and cultures capable of being coherent with themselves’. In other words, unless communities can take control of their own social performance, they are destined for a continuing sense of defeat, loss of will, cynicism, and disempowerment; the opposite of what is required to meet the rapidly emerging challenges of our globalised world.

One further point worth making is that the development of community-based indicators requires a certain level of knowledge. People cannot be expected to develop indicators in a void, without structure and purpose. While the process must remain strongly community based, people need a framework upon which to build their knowledge and skills, and which supports their developing understanding of their own progress. This raises the tension that exists between the empowering functions of self-evaluation and the provision of new knowledge through the engagement of outside expertise (Kenny, 2002).

### **The Art of Engagement**

Clearly, one of the central issues for *Small Towns: Big Picture* was the need to engage people in the development of these indicators. For Lucy (1997), ‘it is the arts which engages the human experience’ and, by their very nature, promote dialogue, communication, and social interaction. The arts create the fertile ground for growth in new ways of thinking, and according to Spokes (2003) are the vital ingredient in any effort to inspire and motivate people, ‘because it is the cultural dimension which encompasses the world of values, motivations, aspirations, attitudes, and creativity—a world where hopes, dreams and plans engage the heart and soul, not just within the psyches of individuals but between them and among them—at the heart of communities themselves’.

Hence, if we are to engage people in new ideas we need to create dynamic social processes that allow us to reflect on our values, ideas, and modes of expression, and also to postulate and play with the possibilities of how things could be. Lane (1996) argues that the 500-year-old humanistic tradition of art for the elite, cut off from community, will not serve the needs of our future society. If we are to rekindle our creative energies, to produce vibrant, responsive, sustainable communities, then Rogelj (2003) believes we must all become artists—willing to take creative risks and make previously unimagined connections across disciplines and cultures.

### The Social Dimension of the TBL

Social capital has emerged as a key concept in the re-engagement and revitalisation of rural communities. A leading author on social capital, Robert Putnam (1993), describes it as the trust, norms, and networks needed to facilitate cooperation. Others such as Cox (1998) and Bullen and Onyx (1998) have described it as the 'glue' that holds society and communities together, 'created from a myriad of everyday interactions between people'. Key dimensions defined by Bullen and Onyx (1998) are: valuing self and others; trust (interpersonal and generic); connection (participation and networks); multiple relationships; and reciprocity in relationships.

While the concept of social capital has flourished across all areas of government, the development of a universally accepted definition and method of measurement remains in its infancy, leaving contemporary researchers and government agencies to compile indices from a range of approximate items. These have included the measurement of such items as the level of trust in government, voting trends, membership in civic organizations, newspaper readership, or hours spent volunteering as proxies for evaluating the amount of 'glue' holding a community together.

The concept of social capital has effectively expanded our understanding of the role of community in its own development—changing the way governments approach community development. Apart from the concern that governments may use the concept of social capital to shift responsibility for development further onto community—it may not, however, be enough to help communities become more *coherent with themselves*. Measurements of trust, cooperation, and networks may be useful indicators of change, but they do little to explain the way a community enables or inhibits the development of these particular attributes. Rather, they are observable consequences of community cohesion, derived without the need for any depth of understanding of the cause and effect relationships that underpin such outcomes as trust and cooperation.

Rural communities, particularly, understand how critical human relationships are to effective mobilisation of local skills and resources. This is often described as the 'lamington' (type of cake) or 'sweat' equity involved in creating and maintaining many local facilities and essential services in small communities. For example the local hospital and the local fire brigade generally rely on fundraising and local volunteerism. Those who live in more urban or metropolitan areas take the provision of such services for granted—never having to consider the role of individuals in their access to services.

A number of community consultation processes (e.g. the Purple Sage Project [1998] and People Together Project [2000]) identified community attributes that people believe are essential to the creation of a socially successful community. Common threads include the need for human warmth, a feeling of safety, a sense of belonging and connectedness, a sense of common purpose and identity, cooperation, mutual respect, and the ability to participate. These attributes would seem a good place to start in terms of devising criteria for social sustainability, but are they comprehensive enough or well located within a meaningful theoretical structure?



Max-Neef et al. (1991) have developed an evaluative framework aimed at revitalising small and medium-sized urban and rural communities which goes further than the concept of social capital and captures a wider set of attributes than those identified through the community consultation processes. In essence, Max-Neef et al. have identified nine fundamental human needs that form part of a systems analysis of the way communities function. The nine needs, as described by Max-Neef et al. are:

<i>Subsistence</i>	Access to food, shelter, employment
<i>Protection</i>	Safety and protection
<i>Affection</i>	Friendships, a good family, emotional care
<i>Understanding</i>	Encouraged to be investigative and curious
<i>Participation</i>	Ability to interact, share ideas and humour, mutual respect
<i>Idleness</i>	Free to imagine a future, reflect on the past, dream, have fun
<i>Creation</i>	Free to express passion, boldness, inventiveness, and curiosity
<i>Identity</i>	Sense of belonging, consistency, values, symbols
<i>Freedom</i>	Be accepted—open-mindedness, tolerance

The development of this framework is based on three main postulates. Firstly, development must be about people and not about objects. We therefore need an indicator of the growth of people—in addition to the GDP indicator of the growth in objects—to assist in decisions about which development is better than another. Secondly, the traditional belief that human needs tend to be infinite, change over time, and are different between cultures and historical periods, is conceptually inaccurate. Max-Neef et al. (1991) argue that our fundamental human needs are in fact finite, few, and classifiable, and that it is the way in which these needs are satisfied which makes us culturally diverse. Thirdly, it is argued that the inadequate satisfaction of any of the fundamental needs results in collective pathologies—such as widespread distrust, fear, and cynicism about the future. Perpetual frustration at not being able to participate, express oneself, be heard and respected can ‘systematically erode the creative capacity of people, leading them slowly from active resentment into apathy and loss of self-esteem’.

If we accept Max-Neef et al.’s logic (briefly outlined here), these nine fundamental needs form the basis for better understanding how well communities are functioning, and the areas of greatest deficit. This work seems to capture all the essential elements of a sustainable/resilient society, including often overlooked factors like the need to foster creativity, cultural diversity, and freedom of expression. If the crux of rural sustainability lies in the ability of communities to innovate, these elements would seem critical to the building of community capacity. When compared with the attributes of social capital and the attributes of a successful community, it seems that the Max-Neef et al. approach not only digs deeper and wider, but provides an understanding of the foundations of social capital and the attributes of a

healthy community—and enables communities to self-evaluate and take action to improve their own social performance.

### Measurement of Community Cohesion

Communities where people learn together, share information and knowledge, are creative and innovative, and where wide participation and involvement is fostered, are more likely to be successful. (Rogers, 2001)

The Small Towns: Big Picture project drew on the work by Max-Neef et al. (1991) and the nine basic human needs. However, Max-Neef et al. describe and analyse the nine needs in quite complex ways, which are not particularly user friendly. Consequently, each of the nine needs had to be interpreted in such a way that people could understand their local relevancy and meaning. Secondly, Max-Neef et al.'s work in exploring these needs with people from a range of different cultures does not aim to produce a performance rating (refer to Max-Neef et al. [1991] for more detail). Consequently, a process was devised to produce a subjective numerical rating for each of the nine needs.

To begin, a working group was set up, including fellow academics, representatives from the Department of Human Services, the Department of Natural Resources and Environment, local government, and St Luke's Anglicare. This group worked through each of the nine human needs and came up with an interpretation that would ultimately be put to a series of focus groups as triggers for open discussion. These were as follows:

<i>Freedom</i>	Does your community encourage independent thought and action?
<i>Sustenance</i>	Does your community take care of its disadvantaged?
<i>Reflection</i>	Does your community take time to dream, have fun, reflect on the past, fantasise about the future?
<i>Affection</i>	How welcoming and friendly is your community?
<i>Creativity</i>	Does your community encourage imagination, boldness, inventiveness, and curiosity?
<i>Understanding</i>	Is your community a learning community?
<i>Protection</i>	Does your community provide for a safe environment?
<i>Participation</i>	Does your community encourage participation?
<i>Identity</i>	Does your community have a strong sense of identity?

Twenty focus groups comprising four different demographic groupings, namely young people (high school age), business people, senior members, and a group we called the 'volunteers group' made up of people who were involved in the community but who did not hold official office, were convened during April 2002. The process for each focus group meeting involved an open discussion about each word in turn. It was readily apparent that people understood the essential meaning of the words well

beyond the trigger statements—demonstrated by the full and vibrant discussions that were had. Each participant was asked to write down their own thoughts about the community’s performance from their own perspective. These comments were collected, anonymously, for each word. The participants were then asked to rate their community’s performance on a scale between 1 and 6, where 1 was ‘performs poorly’ and 6 was ‘performs very well’. An example of the narratives and subjective scores produced is provided in Figure 2.

Clearly, the scoring system is highly subjective, rendering the outcomes limited in terms of the rigours required for scholarly comparisons between groups or communities. The most obvious example of this is the difference

**FREEDOM: (Community Rating 2.6)**

*Does your community encourage independent thought and action?*

- This town is run by committees – and if you don’t live by their rules you can find yourself excluded.
- Some people are more tolerant than others.
- People here have experienced life’s hard times – and are not so judgemental of others.

**AFFECTION: (Community Rating 2.8)**

*How welcoming and friendly is your community?*

- Affection depends on your social standing.
- Its not very friendly. We arrived 8 years ago. My mother still doesn’t feel a member of the community.
- Friendly on the surface...but hard to find special friends - friendly now – after 27 years.

**CREATIVITY: (Community Rating 2.2)**

*Does your community encourage imagination, boldness, inventiveness, and curiosity?*

- This community is scared of change – particularly if it comes from outside.
- There is a growing sense of creativity here. Outsiders are encouraging it along.
- Tolerates boldness, but slow to participate.
- Becoming more open to try new things – growing in confidence to have a go.

**PROTECTION: (Community Rating 2.8)**

*Does your community provide for a safe environment?*

- Its not the safest place, particularly at night when fights break out in the pubs.
- There’s drugs all over the place and the police don’t seem to do anything.
- Not as safe as it used to be – drugs/needles/lack of law presence, shire out of town.
- The town doesn’t seem to self-regulate very well - No police available when needed.
- It’s a safe and sane town most of the time.

**PARTICIPATION: (Community Rating 2.3)**

*Does your community encourage participation?*

- If you’re not one of the big people or the footy heads, then you don’t really have a say in anything.
- Not enough people participate – the same people do everything, including welcoming new comers.
- Very few young people get involved.
- Clashes of personality can affect participation - Not all opinions are valued.
- Organisational participation only for a select few – let down from previous experiences

**Figure 2.** Narratives and subjective scores on community cohesion.

between one person's perception of what constitutes 'boldness' and another's. A focus group in Maldon thought their community was very bold in that it accepted a group of women who often danced naked on top of Mt Tarrengower (so it is said), while another group thought their Fleece and Flower show was quite bold in its approach. They both rated their community at 5 in terms of boldness and creativity. Nonetheless, the scoring provides a starting point for improvement. More importantly, the narrative information provides a deeper understanding of what is behind the score.

### *Integration of the Arts*

To help engage the community in the process of developing the Community Cohesion Index, playwright Craig Christie was commissioned to create a theatrical performance. Christie attended all 20 of the focus group discussions, gathering information and insights into the issues confronting these small rural communities. Through a series of creative workshops, a theatrical performance called *Right Where We Are* was successfully produced, drawing together the different generational perspectives on what is happening in these towns. For example, the senior members of all the communities seemed the most satisfied and were doing *all right where they are*, while the young people generally felt that *nothing was going right where they are*—even though their parents were planning to *stay right where they are*. Performed by local people from each town (requiring a double cast), the play presents a series of snapshots linking the common bond of shared experiences that span the years and resonate strongly in the here and now.

For example, In response to the commonly held view that it is difficult to change things—to do things differently—a song called 'That's Not the Way We Do It', sung by Jesse Bickerton, an 18-year-old from Talbot, was received by the audience with great hilarity:

Not the Way We Do It  
[first verse and chorus]

I buggered up  
I made a big mistake  
I shouldn't try to spit into the wind  
I should have known  
I should have cottoned on  
I should have stopped myself before I sinned  
When they asked for my opinion look what I did instead  
Of keeping my big mouth shut and just nodding my head.  
I made a good suggestion, well I thought it was okay  
And then I kept repeating it so they'd see things my way

And they said WHAT?  
You want to do WHAT?  
You want to change WHAT?  
I don't believe I'm hearing this  
You better sit and listen  
'Cause it's not the way we do it in this town  
You can't just barge in and start messing around  
With the way we do the things we do round here  
It's not the way we do it in this town  
Don't rock the boat or we'll be bringing you down  
If a thing ain't broke don't fix it, is that clear  
It's not the way we do it.

*Stage 2: the development of action plans*

Stage 1 of Small Towns: Big Picture produced the initial benchmark indicator information and stimulated community interest and involvement in the process. Stage 2 involves the development of action plans designed to improve on the initial benchmark findings. At the time of writing, funding to continue working with only one of the communities has been secured. Importantly, this funding comes through the State Government Health Agency—VicHealth—under the Mental Health Promotion Program, which aims to build greater involvement of local government in the pursuit of broad community well-being and mental health initiatives. Consequently, the community cohesion action plans that are being developed in the community of Carisbrook are being directly linked to the Municipal Health Plans of the Central Goldfields Shire.

The action plans are being developed through an integrated arts program—ultimately producing public art reflecting the community's commitment to supportive, inclusive relationships, strong, diverse social networks, and the improvement of community cohesion and mental health as the key to community vitality and prosperity.

Since completing stage 1, there have also been a number of self-directed activities emerging in each community, suggesting that people are feeling better connected, more inspired to get involved, and more confident about their ability to make a difference. These include:

- piloting a community power company in partnership with the Bendigo Bank and North Central Greenhouse Alliance;
- piloting hydrogen cell technology in local hospitals in partnership with the CSIRO (Commonwealth Scientific Information Research Organisation);
- new initiatives focusing on local creativity—formation of singing groups, new arts projects (e.g. Party in the Park);
- development of an arts policy by local government (Central Goldfields Shire).

According to Daryl McLeish of Carisbrook, 'the whole concept was of immense value to the community. It was an awakening and put into

people's minds that new and exciting things can happen. This has had a snowballing effect on the community—stimulating positive initiatives which are a direct offshoot of our involvement with *Small Towns: Big Picture*.'

### **The Role of Local Government**

Unfortunately, there was limited involvement of local government during stage 1 of *Small Towns: Big Picture*. However, as McKinnon (2003) articulates, an ambition of the project in its initial stage was to demonstrate to local government just how arts projects can be effective in engaging local communities in complex planning agendas. The tangible and substantial outcomes are beginning to elicit real interest—with the challenge being to translate this into hands-on involvement in stage 2.

It is encouraging to hear the Chief Executive Officer of one of the three shires involved comment that 'it's one of those things that local government need not necessarily be involved with, but yet when you look at the aims of the program and the aims of what La Trobe University is trying to do, it almost sits exactly with what local government's thinking is'.

### **Concluding Comments**

Like many who have studied the dynamics of change in rural Australia, it has become clear that fostering and harnessing community engagement is the key to any prosperous future for rural communities and their wider regions. This project acknowledges that the only way to properly measure change in these communities is via 'community-owned' assessments. *Small Towns: Big Picture* attempts to make sense of TBL assessment in the context of rural community growth and decline.

The indicators developed and applied in a local setting enable a greater understanding of community development and, more widely, regional sustainability. The importance of the work, according to G. Lawrence (2003, personal communication), is that it:

- is a genuine attempt to make sense of sustainability at the local level;
- has strong community input and ownership;
- overcomes the dry approaches of sustainability accounting by focusing upon local culture and social interaction;
- allows the community to self-reflect upon the images and ideas created by the community (thereby increasing reflexivity);
- is occurring across a number of towns, allowing for comparisons in relation to the success—or otherwise—of various community engagement methodologies;
- has the potential to be utilised nationwide.

The approach taken with *Small Towns: Big Picture* provides a very different focus from that being undertaken by regional economists and rural

sociologists generally. It is firmly based *within* the community, yet provides an external means of monitoring and evaluating change. The tools developed have the ability to be useful locally, while providing a measure of change to policymakers and planners at the local, state, and federal levels.

There is no doubt that the inclusion of commissioned artists and a cultural development approach achieved the project's critical goal of actively engaging people in the process. Without the arts the development of local sustainability indicators, which are locally owned, validated, and used, would have been virtually impossible. The ideas of community-based indicators of sustainability would have continued to be regarded as dull, unimportant, or relevant only to town elites or university researchers. It is the arts approach that has catalysed community interest and vitality, enabling the project to be implemented and further developed into its second stage. This is one rural social researcher who would not consider working in community again without an artist at her side.

## Notes

- [1] Playwright, Craig Christie (Melbourne)—created *Right Where We Are* out of the Community Cohesion indicator development.
- [2] Website developer, Anne Molony (St Arnaud)—created the *Community Connections Directory* website.
- [3] Printmaker, Tiffany Titshall (Talbot)—worked with the communities to produce images of the energy footprint.
- [4] Textile artist, Anna Ashton (Dunolly)—worked with the community to create 150 silk banners reflecting the elements of a strong, coherent community.
- [5] Ceramicist, Judy Lorraine (Wedderburn)—worked with the community to create ceramic footprints installed in the local community garden.
- [6] Film maker, Phillip Ashton (Dunolly)—documented the year-long process in *A Journey in Community Building*, 30-minute video.
- [7] Photographer, Donna Bailey (Bendigo)—worked with the community to produce pinhole images of the local environment.
- [8] Arts coordinator, Andrea Hicks (St Arnaud)—coordinated the vast array of creative workshops and outcomes.
- [9] Central Victoria (and more broadly Australia as a whole) has been experiencing one of the worst droughts of the past century, focusing people's attention on the question of climate change.

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