

Developing and Revitalizing Rural and Remote Communities through Arts and Creativity: a review of literature from Australia

**Presentation at 'Arts for Health' Conference,
Port Macquarie, NSW, Australia
October 2009**

**Kim Dunphy
Program Manager,
Cultural Development Network**

The Cultural Development Network is an independent non-profit organisation, based in Victoria, that generates new ideas and new connections for governments, communities and individual practitioners around issues of cultural vitality.

www.culturaldevelopment.net.au



Generations Project, Geelong, Victoria

Four Pillars of Sustainability

Economic viability

Social equity/ inclusion

Environmental responsibility

Cultural vitality

Jon Hawkes, 2001



Some issues faced by rural and remote communities

Stagnant or declining standards of living including income, health, education, aged care, access to services, infrastructure and housing

lower socioeconomic standards and lower education achievement. In very remote areas 48% leave school at Year 10 or earlier

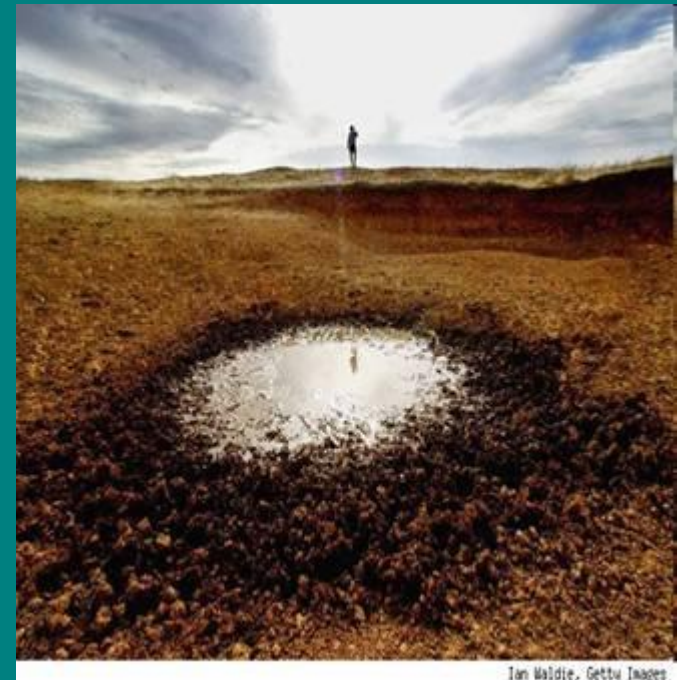
Declining populations, caused in part by the 'brain drain' of young people to cities, and related ageing of communities

loss of social and financial capital, the 'rationalisation' of public and private services

Loss of economic security and sustainability from traditional agricultural enterprise

The disastrous outcomes of climate change; lack of rainfall, reduced riverflows, soil salinity, increased temperatures and related disasters like the unprecedented bushfires in rural Victoria

Health and social indicators for Indigenous people, who are more concentrated in rural and remote regions considerably lower than for the Australian population as a whole.



A town fears for its future as hospital closure threatens

Front page,
The Age,
November 10, 2009



Sylvia Sullivan, 83, fears what will happen if the aged-care facility in which she lives has to close because of a lack of funds for Sea Lake and its district health service.

Image: The Age

Two major approaches in the literature recognising the contribution of the arts to rural regeneration;

- ‘Creative economy’ approach... valuing economic development as goal in itself, and the arts as a contributor to this. (Gibson, University of Wollongong)
- ‘Community cultural development’ approach..... greater focus on social outcomes for communities, including health and well being, social inclusion and educational achievements (VicHealth)

Economic development focus to regeneration: Sheffield mural town, Tasmania.

Community developed murals attract 120 000 people to the town every year; leading to more trade, more shops, more accommodation and restaurants, more jobs, more residents and more funds in the community.

As a project instigated and driven by the community itself, in response to self-identified challenges, the murals are considered by locals to provide a sense of purpose and self-esteem to the whole town, in addition to their economic benefits.

Image: <http://www.sheffieldmurals.com.au/conference/muralhistory.html>



Arts and environmental sustainability:

Visual and performing arts may be valuable in influencing environmental behaviour positively, both individual and community levels, as the arts can 'aid engagement and participation by a broad cross section of the community, and ...provide powerful vehicles for community mobilisation, empowerment, and information transfer'. David Curtis, Institute of Rural Futures, UNE, (2007).

Arts projects ...raise awareness of and increase community engagement in the finding of solutions to environment concerns;

In Bega, NSW, the 'Clean Energy for Eternity: Art and Environment Project' mobilizes community action around energy issues through creative arts action (Hunt, 2007).

The 'Wetlands and Waderbirds Festival' in rural South Australia has dual purposes, increasing tourism and awareness of the value of the flora and fauna of the local area, and issues around water management.

CDN's 'Generations' Project , Latrobe Valley, Victoria engaged the community around issues of a viable future for a region whose livelihood is based around unsustainable coal production (Mulligan and Smith, forthcoming).

The 'Fire Up' event in Fish Creek, Victoria, in 2007, was a creative response to the experience of bushfire, through which community members explored and shared their experiences and stories, as healing and recovery.



Arts and community strengthening:

One theme identified frequently in the literature is the contribution of arts participation to the strength of rural communities (Anselm, 2001; Anwar McHenry, 2009).

Anwar McHenry's literature review provides evidence of enhanced participation and creativity in public decision-making, strengthening community capacity, identity and sense of place (Anwar McHenry, 2009).

Kingma (2003) has identified the transmission of information, building of relationships and boosted productivity of community organizations as results of arts and creative initiatives in regional communities. Anselm (2001) also reports that arts practice and strategy can work to preserve viable populations.

Gibson (2008) addresses perhaps the most significant population concern for rural Australia, that of youth out-migration. He observes that while formal job-creation may be limited through creative activities, some of the impacts of youth migration to cities could be mitigated by enriched regional social life and mediating perceptions of the advantages and drawbacks of rural versus urban life.

Arts and civic engagement:

The arts have often been utilised as a means of engagement of rural communities in civic activities;

making a political statement or protest (Hanna, 2002)

raising awareness of an issue, or working towards collaborative solutions (Mills & Brown, 2004; Brennan-Horley, Connell, & Gibson, 2007; Lea, 2009, Ruane, 2007, Cleveland, 2007).

CDN's Generations Project explored, using the arts as a vehicle, the fraught relationship between traditional owners and pastoralists in central Queensland (Mulligan and Smith, forthcoming)



Dalrymple Shire,
central Queensland

Arts, culture and well-being of indigenous communities

For Indigenous communities, especially those based in rural areas, arts can often be the most meaningful tool for engagement and expression around important issues.

American author Bill Cleveland documents the way former soldiers and members of the aboriginal community worked to heal the social, environmental and health impacts of atom bomb testing conducted at Maralinga in remote South Australia in the 1950s and 60s (Arts and Upheaval, Cleveland, 2008).

Cultural performance provides an opportunity for civic engagement for indigenous communities, through space for representation and identity formation, political engagement and critique of the dominant culture (Slater, 2007).



Image: Laura Festival, FNQ
<http://www.lauradancefestival.com/>

The Garma Festival of Indigenous Culture, in remote Arnhem Land, NT, provides a significant opportunity for Indigenous communities of the remote Top End to re-engage and revitalise their traditional cultural practices. It also provides significant economic and educational opportunities for Indigenous communities of the region. Health and traditional healing are a focus.

It also provides non-Indigenous Australians with unique learning experiences of Indigenous culture, within a framework and environment managed by traditional owners (Slater, 2006).

Re-storying indigenous culture, or Australia, through the arts



Photo: Wayne Quilliam @Yothu Yindi Foundation

Arts for its own sake

Regeneration through creativity, Natimuk, Victoria

Natimuk is experiencing a cultural revival owing to the growing community of artists who have made the town their home and workplace. Natimuk and region have become a richer place by virtue of the arts being part of the environment.

The presence of artists makes a creative environment that in itself attracts other artists. This in turn generates more creative activity, such as the Biannual Natifrinj Festival.

This creative revival has also had economic outcomes, including increased population, real estate value, art sales, tourist revenue.





Arts for its own sake

This view leads to the consideration that the economy should support arts and creativity rather than the other way around

Images: Port Fairy Folk festival
www.portfairyfolkfestival.com

Factors that seem pivotal in building long-term sustainability for arts and creativity in rural communities include

- appreciation of local culture, history and heritage, local people, assets and characteristics;
- enthusiastic local leadership, positive attitudes, local entrepreneurship and investment;
- a focus on retaining young people through employment, recreational, and educational initiatives.

Factors that might support initiatives in other communities:

- commitment from government to cultural vitality dimension of planning and public policy
- recognition of the value of local cultural product and practices
- support for arts in communities, especially networks of supporting professionals
- better funding support, including long term investment and less onerous application processes
- data collection about arts activities including outcomes at a local level
- awards for good practice

(Dunn and Koch, 2006; WA Committee, 2004; Mulligan and Smith, 2007)

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The full paper is available from
www.culturaldevelopment.net.au/publications.htm

The whole project is available from <http://creativecommons.ca>
Creative City Network, Canada. Rural research project

Research directed by Dr. Nancy Duxbury and Heather Campbell,

[Centre for Policy Studies on Culture and Communities](#),

Simon Fraser University (Vancouver), with international collaborators:

- Australia – Kim Dunphy, Program Manager, Cultural Development Network, Melbourne
- United States – Dr. Patrick Overton, Director, Front Porch Institute, Oregon
- Europe – Dr. Lidia Varbanova, Laboratory for European Cultural Cooperation, Amsterdam;
and the Centre for Intercultural and Social Development, Montréal