

## **COLLABORATING WITH COMMUNITIES: AN ASSETS-BASED APPROACH TO COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**

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### **Introduction**

This paper reports on two action research projects conducted in the Latrobe Valley in Victoria in 1999 and 2000, and Eagleby in South East Queensland in 2002.<sup>1</sup> The projects involved working collaboratively with local residents to plan and build community and economic development initiatives. In this paper I particularly want to highlight firstly the strategies used to work with groups who are frequently marginalised from planning and development processes, and secondly the forms of economic diversity that comprise communities yet are frequently overlooked or undervalued in economic and community planning.

The action research projects comprised four stages:

- Acknowledging existing representations of the communities
- Generating new representations
- Creating spaces for people to identify with these representations
- Providing opportunities for people to act on that identification.

In the following four sections of the paper I discuss each research stage in terms of its underpinning principles, and the tools and strategies used to work with local residents. A more complete discussion of principles, tools and strategies is provided in the free online Resource Kit that was produced as part of the first research project (Cameron and Gibson, 2001). A documentary illustrating the Latrobe Valley and Eagleby projects will also be shortly available ('It's in our hands').

### **Acknowledging Existing Representations**

The predominant representation of Latrobe Valley and Eagleby is of two dysfunctional and disadvantaged communities. The Latrobe Valley is a non-metropolitan regional community approximately one and a half hours from Melbourne. In the late 1980s, in line with neo-liberal agendas across the Western world, the decision was made to privatise the area's major employer, the State Electricity Commission of Victoria (familarly known as the SEC). The SEC was first downsized, and the sale of mines and power stations to overseas corporations

followed. Of the original 10,000 jobs in the SEC, 6,000 were lost (in all there was a loss of 8,000 jobs, but 2,000 were outsourced to contractors) (Homes and Foster, 1998). The Valley currently has one of the highest rates of unemployment in Australia. Once represented as a union stronghold that ensured working class affluence and a “Slow, Easy and Comfortable”(SEC) working life, the area has been more recently represented as the “Valley of the Dole” (Tippett, 1997) where social disintegration abounds and well-publicised cases such as the neglect and murder of four year old Jayden Leske from Moe are seen as unsurprising. Eagleby, located mid-way between Brisbane and the Gold Coast, adjacent to the Pacific Motorway, is similarly represented as a place of social breakdown characterised by high levels of inter-generational unemployment, a mobile population, and a high proportion of households living in private or public rental housing.

The two action research projects began by acknowledging these existing and potent representations of the communities. In the Latrobe Valley three community researchers – an unemployed young person, an ex-SEC worker and a single parent – were employed for eighteen months to work on the project and their first task was to collaborate with friends and acquaintances to make photo-essays that told their story of the Latrobe Valley. One of the photo-essays, “Jock’s Story” (see Figure 1) shows derelict industrial buildings, abandoned mining equipment, empty carparks and vandalised bus shelters. From the point of view of Jock and his mates, downsizing and privatisation of the power industry produced a boom in thrift shops, pawn brokers and vacant stores, while workers were thrown onto the “scrap heap”. The photo-essay taps into the feelings of abandonment, loss and nostalgia for a secure and predictable past felt by many across the Latrobe Valley.

A similar story is told in “The Young Latrobe Valley” (see Figure 2). It highlights everyday events such as drinking, smoking, playing pool, going to the pub, visiting Centrelink and going to Court. Like “Jock’s Story” there is a powerful sense of abandonment, with the young people depicting their lives in terms of no jobs, no opportunities and no future.

Figure 1: Jock's Story

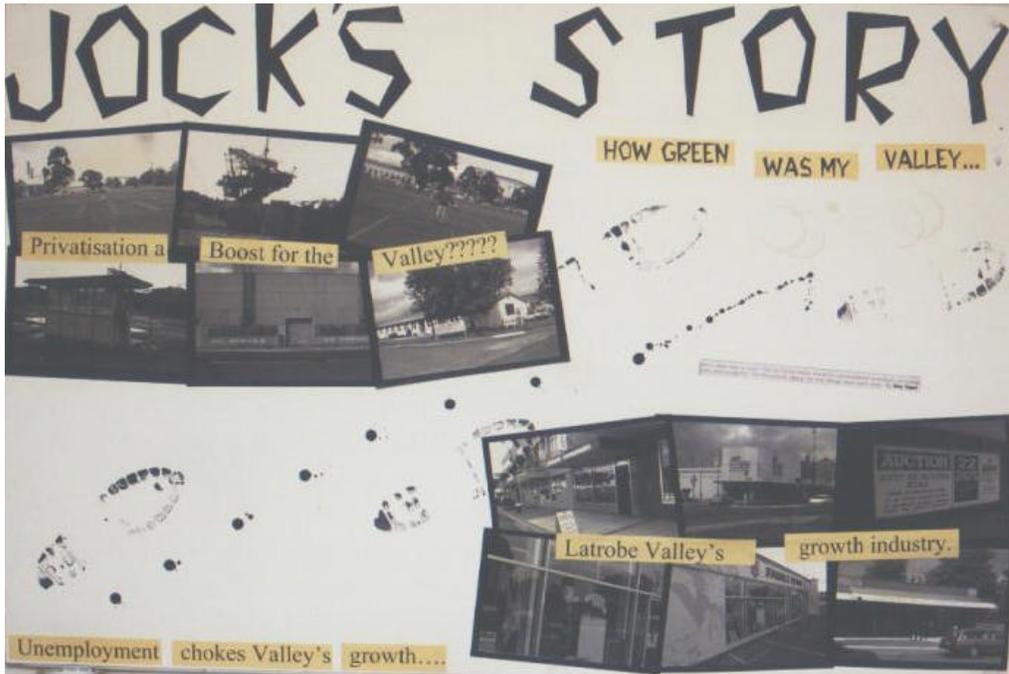
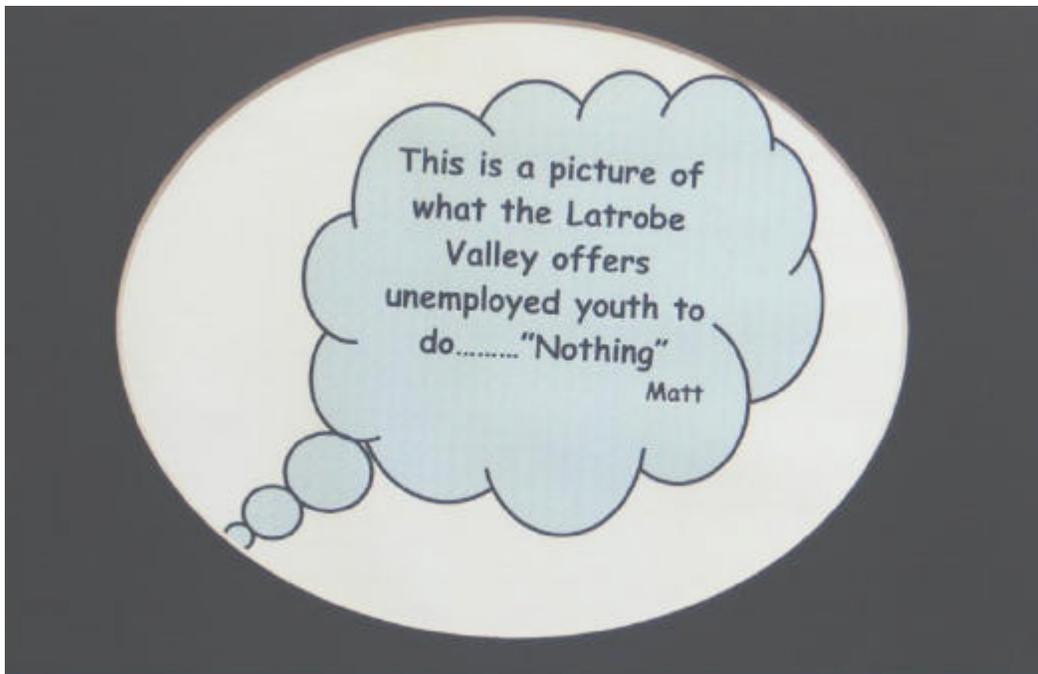


Figure 2: The Young Latrobe Valley – Detail



The photo-essays were used by the community researchers to initiate conversation and connection with other unemployed young people, ex-SEX workers and single parents as they visited neighbourhood houses, numeracy and literacy classes, men's violence management groups, Work for the Dole projects and other places where they were likely to encounter people who been hit hard by the restructuring of the SEC. The photo-essays proved an invaluable tool for "breaking the ice". In the words of one community researcher, "[Yvonne] would present herself as a single parent, and I would present myself as an unemployed person, and automatically you would have that rapport with someone, because you're on the level that they're on".

The importance of initially acknowledging dominant and negative representations is emphasised by another community researcher as she reflects on a conversation with an ex-SEC worker at a numeracy and literacy class where she was talking with the group about the possibility of people working together on community initiatives:

One particular gentleman was quite obviously very frustrated and pessimistic. He was quite vocal and kept presenting me with stumbling blocks. "Look what they have done?" "What are they going to do about it?" "What's the use." "No-one is going to be bothered." "People will want to be paid".

I tried to address his issues without being confrontational. I tried to be sympathetic and understanding. We talked a bit about the problems in our community. I agreed with what he had to say and used "Jock's Story" as an image to sum it all up. It was evident that we had to almost exhaust that line of thinking before moving on.

John Forester in his research on the day-to-day work of planners also highlights the importance of acknowledging current representations and understandings. In a chapter entitled 'On not leaving your pain at the door', he argues that participatory processes are likely to fail if planners 'ignore and dismiss history and culture, the self-perceptions and deeply defining experiences, of the citizens involved' (1999: 245).

In the Eagleby action research project discussions with local residents similarly began by acknowledging current representations of the community. Because the Eagleby project was funded only for twelve months this phase was incorporated into a workshop activity where participants brainstormed images and stereotypes of their community. As we found in the Latrobe Valley, people invariably highlighted negative representations of their community.

### **Generating New Representations**

The second stage in each project involved generating a new portrayal of the communities that could counter the negative stereotypes. This stage was underpinned by two bodies of work:

- The asset-based approach of John Kretzmann and John McKnight (1993)
- The community economy approach of the Community Economies Collective (2001)

For many years Kretzmann and McKnight have worked with community activists and organisers from inner city neighbourhoods of large North American cities to refine their asset-based approach to community development. They argue that disadvantaged communities are all-too-often thought of only in terms of their needs, problems and deficiencies. This representation masks the many assets of communities, even those most devastated by economic changes of the late twentieth century. Their aim is to bring to the fore the skills, capacities, dreams, aspirations and desires of the most marginalised and supposedly “needy” people in these communities and to use these informal assets as the foundation for community development projects that are supported by more formal assets such as local councils and social service agencies.<sup>ii</sup>

In a similar vein the Community Economies Collective argues that the economy is generally thought of in terms of wage labour, capitalist enterprises and the production of goods and services for the market. Economic planning and development tend to focus only on this part of the economy. For the Community Economies Collective the economy can be likened to an iceberg primarily comprised of diverse economic activities and processes hidden below the surface (Figure 3). According to the Collective, this diverse economy is a neglected economic development resource.<sup>iii</sup>

**Figure 3: The Visible and Hidden Parts of the Economy**

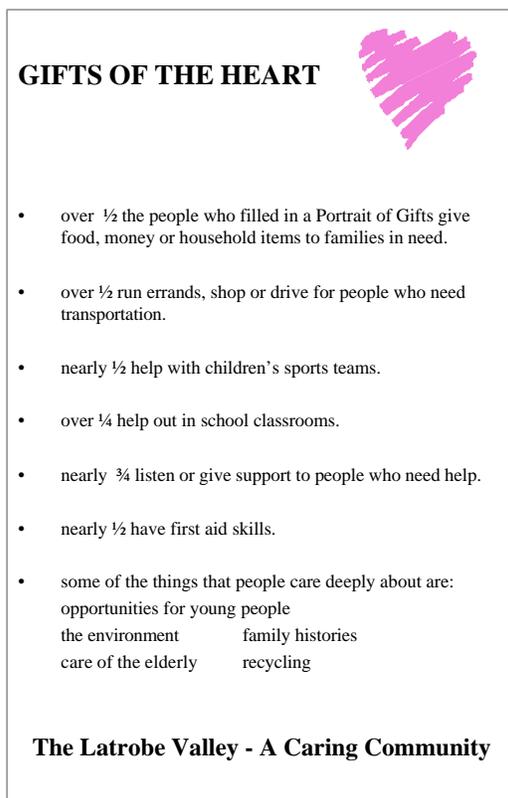


Source: Community Economies Collective

The process of generating new representations of the Latrobe Valley and Eagleby involved bringing to light the people assets that already existed, as well as the diverse economic practices that these people were already engaged in. Importantly the focus was not on people already involved in community and neighbourhood activities but the largely invisible and disconnected folk.

As already discussed above, in the Latrobe Valley this occurred through conversations between the three community researchers and people involved in various employment, lifeskills and social service programs. One tool that was used to focus discussion was a Portrait of Gifts – essentially a comprehensive survey of the variety of everyday skills that people possessed. Unlike a regular survey, however, the aim was not to produce a complete inventory of skills. What was firstly important was the process of a group of people working together to complete a joint Portrait of Gifts. During this process people invariably surprised themselves with the extent of their capacities, learned new things about each other, and found common areas of interest. The second important aspect of the Portrait was that it provided information for generating new representations of the Latrobe Valley. For example, in place of the depiction of the Valley as a dysfunctional community where events such as death of Jayden Leske are commonplace a shared representation of the community as caring was made possible (Figure 4). This and other portrayals of the Latrobe Valley as a learning place made up of skillful people were put together in a small brochure that was widely distributed through the community.

**Figure 4: A New Representation of the Latrobe Valley**



In the Eagleby project one community workshop was held and people worked in small groups with local residents trained as facilitators to brainstorm “things I can do” and “things I would like to do”.<sup>iv</sup> This activity played a similar role to the Portrait of Gifts in the Latrobe Valley. In terms of the process, participants connected with each other and found many areas of common interest. In terms of the representation of the Eagleby community, a considerable knowledge of the skills and abilities, interests and aspirations of local residents was generated.

### **Creating Spaces of Identification**

In Stages Three and Four, the community researchers in the Latrobe Valley and community facilitators in Eagleby continued to work with the largely invisible and disconnected folk to explore and act on the opportunities opened up by the shared knowledge of their communities as comprised of skillful and capable people, alive with aspirations and passions. Initially this involved helping people imagine themselves in terms of the new representations. In their asset-based approach, Kretzmann and McKnight highlight the significance of this step. They argue that the predominant needs based approach means that residents are positioned as part of the problem – as needy, deficient and lacking in the skills and abilities to address issues in their community. Outside experts are therefore required to plan and deliver services, programs and facilities. In the asset-based approach, however, residents are positioned as having fullness, and a capacity to act and create their futures. Outside expertise and resources may still be required but the agenda is more likely to be set by the local community.

Thus in the Latrobe Valley and Eagleby projects, strategies were used to help people imagine ways they might act on their capacities and ideas. One strategy was that of conversation. To return to the earlier reflection from the community researcher on her conversation with the ex-SEC worker, she says:

[I found out that] he is very good with his hands and knows a bit about cars. I asked, hypothetically, if there were a group of single parents interested in learning about car maintenance, and if I could arrange a venue and possible tools, would he be interested in sharing his skills and knowledge? “Yeah. I’d do that, no worries,” he said. I asked him would he expect to be paid for his time. “No. I wouldn’t do it for money,” he replied. I asked, “So do you think you’d get anything out of it yourself?” “Yeah. I suppose I’d get some satisfaction out of it ‘cause I like to help people like yourself.” So I really tried to turn it around and have him answer or resolve his own questions and issues.

In this discussion the ex-SEC worker comes to see himself as having skills and knowledge that could be shared. From focusing on the limitations and people’s unwillingness to act, this participant makes the shift to identify as a potential community resource. This conversation is indicative of the many that took place as people began to imagine the various ways they might act on their abilities and ideas.

Another strategy was to hold community workshops where people shared ideas and possibilities and imagined themselves acting together. In the Latrobe Valley smaller workshops were run with people from the same program such as Work for the Dole, or numeracy and literary classes. The workshops were based around communal food production and eating: pizza making, and bread and scone banking. The aim was to emphasise collective possibilities, and create an environment of fun and exploration, trust and familiarity where people could take risks and play together with new ideas. Larger, open invitation community workshops then followed. In the Latrobe Valley and Eagleby over 60 ideas for community projects were generated at the larger workshops.

### Figure 5: Sample of Ideas Generated at Eagleby Community Workshop

<p><b>Exchanging Skills and Things</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Baby sitting club</li> <li>• Equipment swapping</li> <li>• Recycling centre with materials to make things, e.g. furniture, artwork, creative things using corrugated iron</li> </ul> <p><b>Food and Cooking</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Food co-op/buying group</li> <li>• Baking sessions (bake-offs)</li> </ul> <p><b>Rivers and Fishing</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Focus on Wetlands area – learning about ducks, geese and other birds in the area; get kids out and involved</li> <li>• A fishing club, fishing buddies – younger people team-up with older/more experienced fisherpeople</li> </ul>	<p><b>Green Thumbs</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Making garden gnomes and ornaments</li> <li>• Making raised garden beds for older people and those with disabilities</li> <li>• Gardening workshops</li> </ul> <p><b>Social Activities</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Community dancing to get people together. (e.g. Old-Time, Rock'n roll, Line dancing, Latin American)</li> <li>• Book club/reading</li> <li>• Hair-do sessions</li> <li>• Phone Club – people calling others who are alone</li> <li>• Adopt an aunty, uncle, fishing buddy, parent</li> </ul>
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### Acting on That Identification

The final and ongoing stage of each project involves people acting on their identification as capable and active residents to build community initiatives. In the Latrobe Valley three initiatives are continuing to develop.

Latrobe Valley Community Environmental Gardens (LVCEG) has been established as an incorporated not-for-profit association to transform the 3 hectare site of the old Morwell caravan park into a community garden. The management committee includes unemployed workers, retirees, housewives, people of non-English speaking background and people with learning disabilities. The association has received funding from the Commonwealth Government. Latrobe City Council and gambling funds have also been used to develop the site. The long term vision is for something like CERES, the community and environmental gardens on the banks of Merri Creek in inner-city Melbourne that after 20 years of operation employs 25 equivalent full-time positions and has a budget of \$1.6 million. CERES is an excellent example of an economic and community development initiative that taps into the diverse

economy. In terms of the visible part of the economy, there are the waged labour positions, and goods and services are produced for the market – for example, specialist plants in the bushfood and permaculture nursery which has won a City of Moreland small business award; educational environmental tours for fee-paying school groups; and solar electricity which is sold onto national power grid. The hidden part of the economy is also valued at CERES. The chookers group, for example, is made up of people who work on a roster system to put the free-range chickens to bed each evening and are “paid” in the eggs they collect. That CERES started with a small but dedicated band of volunteer workers to develop into such a diverse enterprise is inspirational to new community initiatives like LVCEG.

Santa's Workshop is a community workshop space where people make large outdoor Christmas decorations under the tutelage of an ex-SEC worker who decorates his house each year, and several other local residents. The workshop currently operates one to two days a week from February to October making decorations that are sold to local businesses and groups like the Chamber of Commerce. Generally several Work for the Dole participants are also involved in making these decorations. The funds generated are used to purchase (usually at cost price from local businesses) the timber and paint needed when the workshop opens for general community use in November and December. Latrobe City Council provides the building – a disused kindergarten building – and covers costs such as electricity and public liability insurance. Santa's Workshop incorporates many parts of the diverse economy. Labourers are volunteer or paid through the Work for the Dole program. Decorations are produced for sale, home use, or to donate to local nursing homes, schools and the like. The materials used by local residents in the Christmas period are purchased from local businesses and the cost is subsidised by the commercial sale of decorations to businesses and others.

Latrobe Community Workshed @ Newborough is primarily a woodworking workshop located in an old butcher's shop in Moe/Newborough. The committee of management of this incorporated association is made up of a diverse group of people including retirees, and people with physical and learning disabilities. At this point in time the Workshed has just opened for general public use and the committee of management is building on earlier exercises in making commercial products as a way of sustaining their activities.

In Eagleby there are currently groups of local residents meeting under six themes to develop their projects and ideas further: rivers and fishing; gardening and cooking; exchanging skills and things; history; social activities; and networking and communicating. The groups all get together every month for a Saturday morning bbq or lunch to talk with each other about how their projects are going, and the various ups and downs they are encountering. A funding application is currently being prepared for State Government Community Renewal funding for a project worker to support the six groups.<sup>v</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The Latrobe Valley and Eagleby projects involve local residents actively working together to imagine and realise their futures. In other words, in these projects

residents participate in not only planning activities but also doing activities. As a consequence there is a transformation for these residents from being 'done-to into doers' (Forester, 1999: 115). The planning and doing activities that residents participate in take account of a diverse economy in which people might participate in paid and unpaid labour, producing a range of goods and services for a variety of purposes – market and non-market. The projects are thus resulting in community and economic development initiatives.

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<sup>ii</sup> Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) introduce their model through the analogy of a glass with water to the halfway mark. Is the glass half-empty or half-full? The answer is, of course, both. The glass is half-full and it is half-empty. Kretzmann and McKnight remind us that individuals and communities are like the glass of water. We are all half-full and half-empty. Like the half-empty glass we have needs, problems and deficiencies; like the half-full glass we also have capacities, gifts and resources.

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<sup>iii</sup> The British sociologist Teodor Shanin has posited that an invisible and informal economy engages around three-quarters of the world's workforce (including the workforce of the so-called developed world); and that the core of this economy is 'family and neighbourhood relationships of mutual support' (no date).

<sup>iv</sup> The three community facilitators in Eagleby and the three community researchers in the Latrobe Valley played a comparable role. All were local residents who were trained in the asset-based and community economies approaches and then played a pivotal role in connecting with other local residents and inviting them into the project. Because of the small budget of the Eagleby project these residents worked voluntarily, although they were paid to run a stand at the local shopping centre as a way of publicising the community workshop.

<sup>v</sup> A worker from another Eagleby project and the research team from Griffith University have been supporting the groups with mailouts, organisation of bus-trips and the like; however, all have agreed that a dedicated worker and facilities are needed to more effectively support the six groups.