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**NEGOTIATING RESTRUCTURING:
A STUDY OF REGIONAL COMMUNITIES
EXPERIENCING RAPID SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC
CHANGE**

Katherine Gibson, Jenny Cameron and Arthur Veno

Department of Geography and Environmental Science and
School of Humanities and Public Policy,
Monash University

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This pilot project addresses issues of regional economic and social change, focussing on the Shepparton region and the Latrobe Valley, two non-metropolitan regions of Victoria that have experienced both different forms and pace of change over the last twenty years. The report analyses selected indicators of change, explores the variety of understandings that community and business leaders in these two regions had of the change process, and recommends new avenues for enhancing regional development and well-being.

The Shepparton region provides an example of restructuring 'success', with agricultural and food processing practices responding to altered world markets, international investment patterns and technological developments. The Latrobe Valley region, identified since the 1920s as the electricity generating powerhouse of Victoria, has undergone a recent and severe economic decline brought about through the privatisation and downsizing of the State Electricity Commission of Victoria. Stories of community coping from focus group discussions in each region highlighted the powerful role that representations of a region as either a victim or an active agent in the face of change can play. It would also seem from the discussions that the Latrobe Valley community has experienced a sudden and dramatic change—the reverse of the earlier boom periods—that has stripped it of its capacity to cope with the consequences; while the Shepparton community, having encountered a series of changes over a period of time, seems to be more resilient and able to respond to change in a positive manner.

Despite the differences between the Latrobe Valley and Shepparton, a significant and overarching expression of disillusionment about the benefits that are often presumed to accrue from economic restructuring emerged from discussions in both regions. Social polarisation, increasing insecurity of employment and the depletion of social networks and resources are all identified by focus group participants as key impacts of the economic restructuring process. The study found that the assumption of a positive relationship between economic growth in productive investments and regional employment, social well-being and the viability of regional communities is now under question.

In the face of somewhat disempowering and disheartening stories of regional change, the research identified an untapped potential for different kinds of responses to rapid change in each region. Participants were able to identify innovative social projects and alternative economic enterprises built upon the capacities of their regional communities. They began to map out the shape of a still largely viable social economy that is the asset base of their respective communities. They pointed to the ways projects build partnerships across difference, and work with markets, the state, social organisations and individuals in innovative ways.

The study aimed to investigate ways that future research might interact with processes of regional change to effect more sustainable and desirable regional futures. The project illustrated that the restructuring of economic activity in the formal economy is but one way of defining regions and understanding regional change. It found that the predominance of the story of economic restructuring potentially disables communities, including those as disparate as Shepparton and the Latrobe Valley, preventing them from responding innovatively to social and economic change. It proposes an intervention that highlights the many real strengths and capabilities of people in regional communities by identifying the existing assets and capacities (or social capital) of the region, and that finds ways of mobilising them in a variety of traditional and alternative forms that enable new and different regional futures to emerge.

Key words: region, restructuring, change, community coping, social capital, assets, capacities

1. INTRODUCTION

In 1997 two very different non-metropolitan regions of Victoria engaged in separate campaigns aimed at attracting National Foods Limited to locate its new \$57 million dairy processing factory in their region. For weeks the economic development offices of the Greater Shepparton City Council and the La Trobe Shire Council compiled their cases as to why this company should choose their respective locality to establish a dairy products plant expected to provide about 120 new jobs (although initial optimistic projections were that up to 700 workers would be employed). Aware of the highly charged struggle being waged, each region sought to highlight its competitive advantage. Shepparton drew upon its image as home to the ‘Clever Food People’ pointing to the dense network of advanced food processing industries already established in the area and the attractions of in situ expertise. The La Trobe Shire presented itself as a region undergoing rapid change from an energy and paper producing region to one based upon smart agriculture and tourism—a place with a ‘competitive’ and ‘work ready’ labour force.

National Foods decided to locate its plant at Morwell in the Latrobe Valley. The new Mayor of the then recently elected La Trobe Shire Council was jubilant. Those from the Shepparton region who had worked on the campaign were dismayed. The disappointed Chief Executive of the City of Greater Shepparton commended the ‘real team effort’ displayed by the city’s Economic Development Unit in ‘chasing this fantastic growth opportunity for our region’ (Adams, 1996:3). The Managing Director of the ‘troubled food group’ was relieved to be having ‘at least \$10 million a year off the group’s cost base’ (Burke, 1996:26), for the new plant was to replace two processing plants in Murray Bridge, South Australia and Taree, NSW, and four distribution centres; and would enable production to proceed with 180 fewer people employed (Burke, 1996:26).¹ The La Trobe Shire’s gain was not only Shepparton’s loss.

In both regions the prospect of a new corporate employer had been viewed as an answer to some of the woes wrought by rapid social and economic change—unemployment, especially of prime age males and youth; declining population growth; rationalisation of traditional industries; and downsizing of services. What explains the intense regional psychic investment in such struggles to attract the ‘golden egg’ of corporate employment? How do regional narratives of change and disaster set the stage for such victories/disappointments? How might such competitive strategies, focussed as they are upon certain types of economic activity, eclipse other activities? What are local perceptions about community coping? And how in turn do these perceptions and knowledge shape the decisions and choices that are made about regional futures? These are some of the questions explored in this pilot project.

Our research focuses on two non-metropolitan regions of Victoria, the Shepparton region and the Latrobe Valley, that have, over the last twenty years, experienced *different forms* of economic and social restructuring and a *different pace* of change.² Our interest in setting these two regions alongside each other is not to make them compete (as they did in the National Foods race) for line honours in terms of regional development ‘success’ but to provide two very different geographical and social contexts within which to explore the questions raised above.

Up to the early 1980s, the Latrobe Valley experienced a substantial period of rapid growth with the development of the power generation industry and the accompanying expansion of the population. More recently the region has undergone severe economic restructuring through the privatisation and

¹ According to the rationalisation plan, the established plants in Taree, New South Wales, and Murray Bridge, South Australia, were to be significantly scaled back from fresh dairy processing (Burke, 1996:26).

² It was the experience of these differences that provided one of the reasons for the choice of these two regions. We were also interested in the different auspices under which economic development had proceeded—that of a mix of private capital, family business, cooperative enterprise and state involvement in the Shepparton region, and that of a large state run authority as well as private capital in the Latrobe Valley. See Appendix 1 for further

downsizing of the State Electricity Commission (SEC). According to the La Trobe Region Employment and Industry Survey conducted by the Gippsland Research and Information Bank employment in the mining, electricity, gas and water sectors declined by almost 8,000 in the period 1988 to 1994 (Kazakevitch, Foster & Stone, 1997:11-2). The impact of this very rapid restructuring on a population with a workforce of around 40,000 has been the focus of frequent (usually negative) media coverage. Metropolitan newspaper headlines such as 'The Valley of the Dole' (Tippett, 1997) and references to the region as 'death valley' (Tuohy, 1994) regularly herald the afflicted nature of the Latrobe Valley.

In contrast, the Shepparton region has had a sustained sequence of restructuring episodes over the last twenty years. From Britain's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) and the dramatic loss of overseas markets for agricultural produce in the early 1970s, the increasing awareness during the 1980s of the threat of severe land degradation from rising water tables and increased soil salinity, through to the more recent period of international investment in agricultural and food processing activities and the growth of the Asian food market, a range of changes have impacted upon the region. The impacts of restructuring on the population of around 50,000 have been differentially experienced, with employment in some sectors like manufacturing, and transport and storage increasing, while in others like agriculture there is a decline. Recent media representation of the Shepparton region portrays it as the site of a 'remarkable revolution' (Collis, 1995b:20).

This working paper initially sketches a brief background to the development of each region highlighting the major restructuring events that have been seen to 'shape' each place in recent years and some of the impacts of changes as shown by a variety of social and economic indicators drawn from Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) Census data and other data sources. The third part of the paper discusses different models of community coping with change and describes and interprets the narratives of community coping that emerged from focus group discussions with business and community leaders held in the two regions in June, 1997 (see Appendix 1 for further discussion of the focus group methodology and list of focus group participants). In section five we turn to subjective assessments of the impact of change that came out of the group discussions. The fifth section explores glimpses of other, alternative stories of community coping with change that focus group participants spoke of. It is these stories of community strengths and innovations that are looked to in the final section which addresses the implications for regional development.

Our objectives in this pilot research were to explore:

- the variety of understandings that people in the regions had of the change process
- the strategies they identified as helping them negotiate change
- their recognition of specific mechanisms of community coping
- the untapped potential for different kinds of responses to rapid change in each region
- ways that future research might interact with the process of regional change to effect more sustainable and desirable regional futures.

2. STORIES OF ECONOMIC RESTRUCTURING

Like many other regions in Australia, the Shepparton region and the Latrobe Valley have been substantially impacted by processes of economic restructuring over the past two decades.

Since the late nineteenth century, the Goulburn Valley, with Shepparton as its regional centre, has been identified as one of the key agricultural regions of Victoria, if not Australia. Viticulture, fruit-growing, dairying and associated food processing activities have flourished, largely sustained by an extensive irrigation system. McLennan (1936:31) declared that irrigation had transformed the Goulburn Valley into 'one of the gardens of Australia'. The Second World War served to strengthen the region's economy, and throughout the ensuing 'long boom' it was home to some of the lucky country's most well-known processed food producers—Campbell's soups, Ardmona and Shepparton Preserving Company (SPC) canned fruits and Henry Jones-IXL jams.

The first shocks to the steady growth trajectory came in the early 1970s when Britain's entry into the European Economic Community (EEC) caused a dramatic loss of the international market for canned fruit and other international trade partners began subsidising their own domestic canning industries (Carter, 1982:16). At the same time domestic market growth began to slow. In the period from 1971 to 1980 it is estimated that employment in the fruit growing sector fell by 40 per cent, and peak seasonal work at the canneries (particularly for women) fell by 20 per cent from 1970 to 1979 (*ibid.*). The Victorian Department of Agriculture directed a change in the size and nature of the fruit growing industry by announcing a tree pull program aimed at reducing the number of canning pears and Granny Smith apples (p.17). The dairying industry, hit by rising costs and declining export markets underwent a process of farm consolidation and technological change (p.18).

A second recession hit in 1981 forcing major rationalisation in the region. The abattoir closed with a loss of 630 jobs at peak capacity (Carter, 1982:13&18). SPC and Ardmona canning factories reduced their level of production and the Henry Jones-IXL cannery at Kyabram closed (p.13). In the early 1980s the Victorian Ministry of Employment and Training and the Shepparton Citizens Employment Committee undertook a regional industry survey in the light of the significant job losses the region was suffering. A series of recommendations for a coordinated regional development strategy were made, including developing new markets for agricultural produce (particularly fresh fruit, fruit yoghurts, tomato products, butter fats and whey proteins), attracting further food processing industries and addressing the environmental crisis of salinity (Carter, 1982). Many of these recommendations were acted upon (Carter & Luscombe, 1985:7) and some can be seen to have borne fruit (excuse pun).

In 1991 the region suffered a further shock with the threatened closure of the SPC cannery—the cooperative business that lay at the symbolic 'heart' of the regional economy. Following over-capacity in the canning industry and growing competition from cheap imports, SPC had embarked on a program of diversification through the purchase of other food processing companies throughout Victoria, but losses in 1990 of \$25.6 million resulted (Curtain,1993). A new board comprised mainly of local residents was voted in and immediately divested the company of the new ventures. Under the directorship of a local orchardist, John Corboy, the management and employees designed a new labour agreement that abandoned key features of the existing award arrangements, including suspending weekend penalty rates and removing rostered days off during the harvest season—in effect, cutting wages. Despite opposition from the Victorian Trades Hall Council and the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), a majority of the permanent workforce agreed to this plan, with the promise of a new profit-sharing scheme for workers once profitability was reached. The plan was successful, SPC recovered its viability, made productivity gains and increased sales to the point where employment is higher than it was in the pre-crisis period (J. Corboy, 1997, pers. comm., 5 June). Indeed, between 1991 and 1995, SPC's production of fruit and tomato products increased from 85,000 to 120,000 tonnes, of which more than 60 per cent was exported (Collis, 1995b:20)

The battle to save SPC with a workforce in 1991 of almost 400 permanents and 1,300 casuals

counter the forces of economic change. Local councils came together to promote themselves as the 'Clever Food People', and the area as 'the food bowl of Australia' (Shepparton Kyabram Rodney Development Corporation, 1993:1&3). The region is currently home to 18 food processing plants, hundreds of millions of dollars of value-added products are exported each year and an almost equivalent amount has been invested in the region (Collis, 1995a, 1995b, 1996). In terms of industry and agricultural restructuring the Shepparton region is seen as a success. Australian companies like SPC and Ardmona are characterised as the 'survivors in a long and painful rationalisation of the local canning industry, which a decade ago was on the brink of extinction' (Collis, 1996:1). The region's capacity to attract multinational companies is reported in glowing terms:

Quietly, quietly, a remarkable revolution has unfolded in northern Victoria's Goulburn Valley. Some of the world's largest food processing companies have moved into the region in an industrial migration that is making Victoria one of the key food-producing regions of Asia (Collis, 1995b:20).

The story of industry and agricultural restructuring is reflected in the stories of change presented in the focus group discussions with community spokespeople drawn from the Shepparton region. One orchardist described the shifts in the following terms:

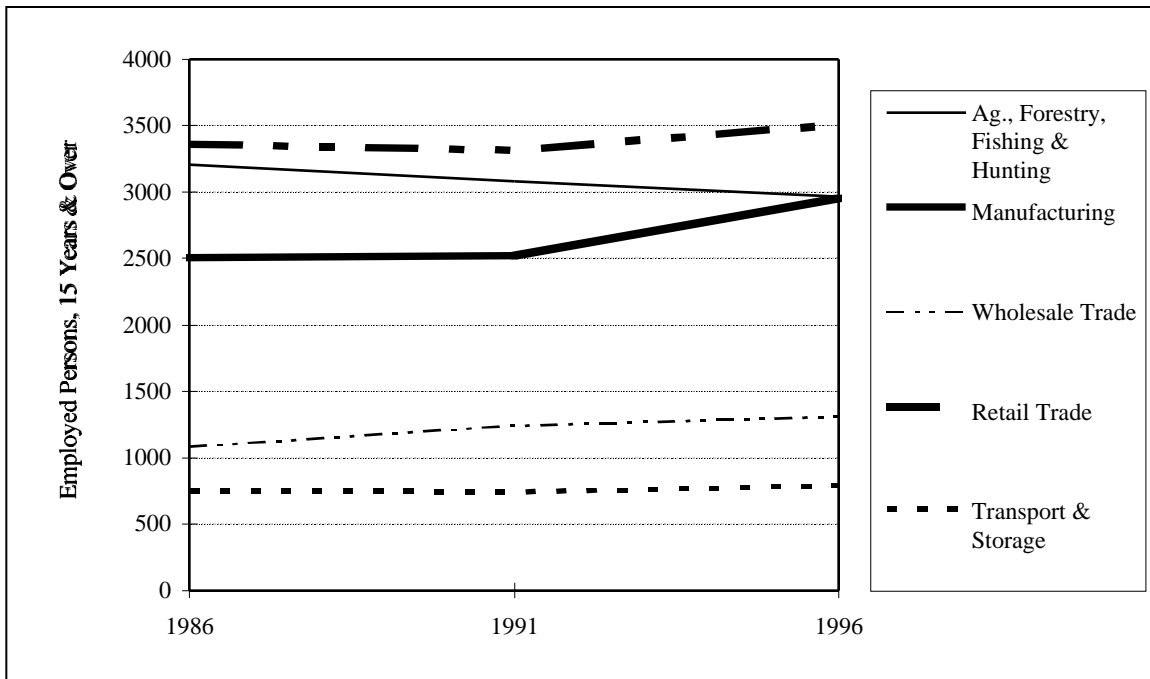
What has happened over the last decade and a half within the business sector is that we've found that the operations have become larger in the manufacturing and agricultural place and have grown very significantly over that time and it's been driven by a need to be competitive. That's the bottom line at the end of the day, they've become more mechanised, and that has had some dramatic spin-offs in the sense of labour . . . if you look at the Goulburn Valley it's had a spectacular track record over the past five years . . . that's been driven by massive capital injections and there is something like five hundred million dollars invested in the five major food processors in the area.

The recent growth in food processing activities has impacted on the composition of the labour force in the Shepparton region. Between 1991 and 1996 there was an almost 17 per cent increase in manufacturing employment in the City of Greater Shepparton,³ compared with an increase of just over 6 per cent in the State as a whole (Figures 1 and 2). Overall in the ten year period between 1986 and 1996, manufacturing employment grew by 18 per cent, while in the State it declined by almost 4 per cent. Associated with the growth in the manufacturing sector, employment in the transport and storage sector increased by over 5 per cent between 1986 and 1996, while decreasing across the State by almost 12 per cent. Employment in the wholesale and retail trades sector grew steadily between 1986 and 1996 in both the City of Greater Shepparton and Victoria.

One area of employment in the City of Greater Shepparton in which there was a decline is the agriculture, forestry and fishing sector (Figure 1), which saw a decrease of over 7 per cent between 1986 and 1996. In the State as a whole a decline of over 12 per cent in this sector between 1986 and 1991 was followed by an increase of nearly 4 per cent between 1991 and 1996 (Figure 2). As the international markets of Australia's food products have grown in response to the reduction in

³ The City of Greater Shepparton was formed through the amalgamation in 1995 of parts of the Shires of Shepparton, Rodney and other shires, and the City of Shepparton. The Australian Bureau of Statistics has produced time series profiles for this new Local Government Area, comparing data from the 1986, 1991 and 1996 census (where the classifications are comparable) and using the new 1996 boundaries of the City of Greater Shepparton. When using this data the region is referred to as 'Greater Shepparton' or 'City of Greater Shepparton'. The term 'Shepparton region' is used to refer to data related to the old Shires of Shepparton and Rodney, and the City of Shepparton (see Maps 1 and 2 in Appendix 2). The populations of the new City of Greater Shepparton and the combined area of the old Shires of Shepparton and Rodney and City of Shepparton are comparable: ABS estimates that in 1991 the population within the boundaries of what is now the City of Greater Shepparton would have been 50,725; according to the 1991 census the population of the combined Shires of Shepparton and Rodney, and the City of Shepparton (what is referred to in this paper as the

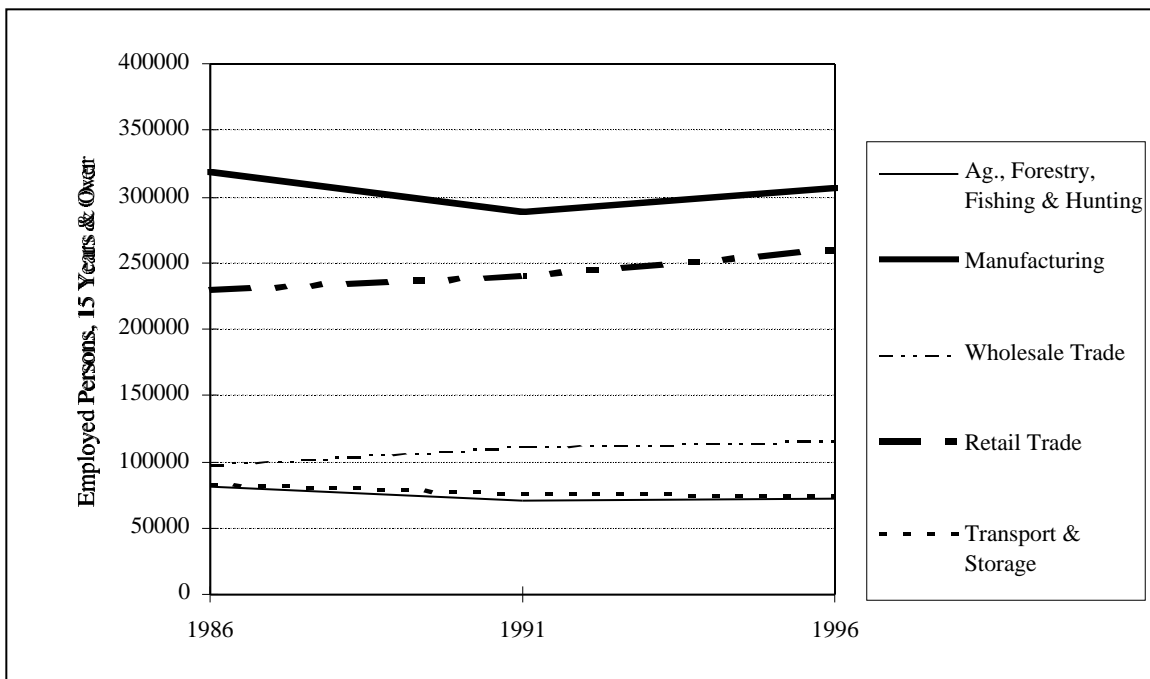
Figure 1: Employment, City of Greater Shepparton, 1986–1996, Labour Force Employed in Selected Employment Sectors



(Source: ABS, 1996 Census, Catalogue 2020.0, Table T15)

Note: See Appendix 2, Table 1 for details of all employment sectors.

Figure 2: Employment, Victoria, 1986–1996, Labour Force Employed in Selected Employment Sectors



(Source: ABS, 1996 Census, Catalogue 2020.0, Table T15)

Note: See Appendix 2, Table 3 for details of all employment sectors.

agricultural subsidies in the European Community (EC) and the growth of the Asian food market, the Shepparton region has seen the consolidation of land holdings and the development of larger scale production units serving the larger scale manufacturing units that have located in the area. Technological change in dairying and horticulture farming practices has also been a major force in the restructuring of the region. The net result is that employment in the agricultural sector has declined. Commenting on the changes that have occurred, Neil Lowe, Managing Director of Tatura Milk Industries, stated: ‘The tomato industry used to be based on 10-acre plots and immigrant peasants living in ex-army huts. Today it’s a sophisticated business with farms running into hundreds of acres of tomatoes that are mechanically harvested’ (cited in Collis, 1995b:20). Similar changes in the dairying industry were discussed by one participant in the focus group discussions:

I started looking at what we were producing as a farm twenty years ago and looking at this year’s production [and] we have increased our production by five fold and I really can’t see that stopping and that is the way we are surviving and we are trying to do that not only on the farm but in the factories we supply. I picked up an annual report from our local factory, twenty years ago, shareholders had just over a million dollars in funds invested in that factory and today they have 50 million . . . the other interesting thing as far as our industry is concerned is that twenty years ago our factory had 480 suppliers, now we have 430 but have increased our production from 14,000 tonnes in 1977 to 55,000 tonnes [now] with less dairy farmers.

Here it must be noted that the employment data presented in this section is based on the Australian Bureau of Statistics censuses which were conducted in June (1986) and August (1991 and 1996)—the off-peak period in the canning industry and the agricultural sector more generally. According to a summary provided by the Greater Shepparton City Council, 15 of the major food manufacturing plants in the area employ over 2,000 permanent workers and an additional 2,500 seasonal workers (1997:23-4). Similarly, there would be an increase in agricultural employment in the peak season. Partly because of this opportunity for seasonal employment, that is well remunerated while it lasts, the region has a large number of residents who subsist on irregular and low incomes. In the period 1976 to 1991 the Shepparton region consistently had a greater proportion of households on lower annual incomes than the State as a whole (Figures 3 and 4).⁴ Despite the increased level of investment and production in the area in the early to mid 1990s and the growth in some sectors of employment, the area continues to have, in 1996, a greater proportion of households in the lower incomes groups than for the State (Figure 5).⁵

⁴ Income data for Local Government areas is not available from the 1971 census. The income categories are defined as follows:

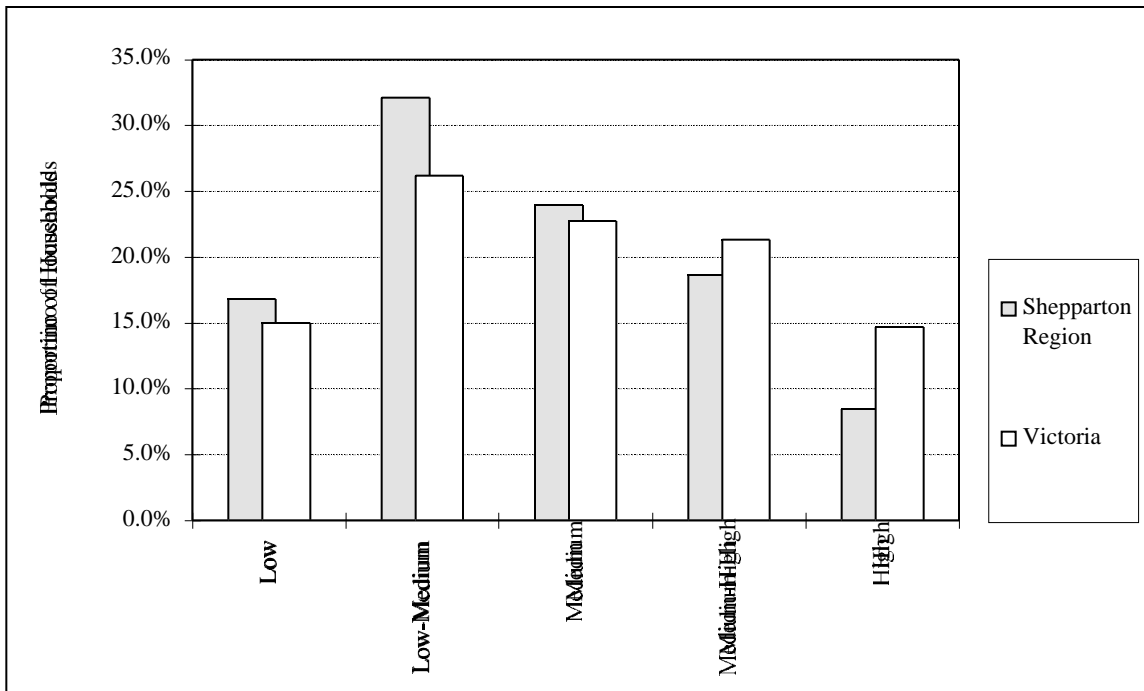
	1976	1991
Low	\$0-\$4,000	\$0-\$12,000
Low-Medium	\$4,001-\$8,000	\$12,001-\$25,000
Medium	\$8,001-\$12,000	\$25,001-\$40,000
Medium-High	\$12,001-\$18,000	\$40,001-\$60,000
High	>\$18,000	>\$60,000

Based on a CPI increase of +44 per cent for 1976 to 1981 and +116 per cent for 1981 to 1991 (ABS Catalogue 6401.0) the dollar amounts are comparable.

⁵ There is little difference in the proportion of people aged 65 and over in the Shepparton region in 1976 and 1991, and the City of Greater Shepparton in 1996 compared with the State as a whole (ABS Catalogues 2410.0; 2428.0; 2721.0; 2020.0; and 2024.0.030.001). The higher proportion of households in the lower income categories therefore seems to be unrelated to the age structure of the population.

It is important to note that in the 1996 census people were asked to state their *usual* gross weekly income. It was up to the person completing the census form to determine what their usual circumstances were. This has implications for seasonal workers where, for example, one person might state that their usual income was their income received during the canning season, another might state that their usual income was the unemployment benefit they received during the off-peak season, and another might average out their weekly income across the peak and off-peak periods. According to ABS the different definitions that people use will have a ‘mutually

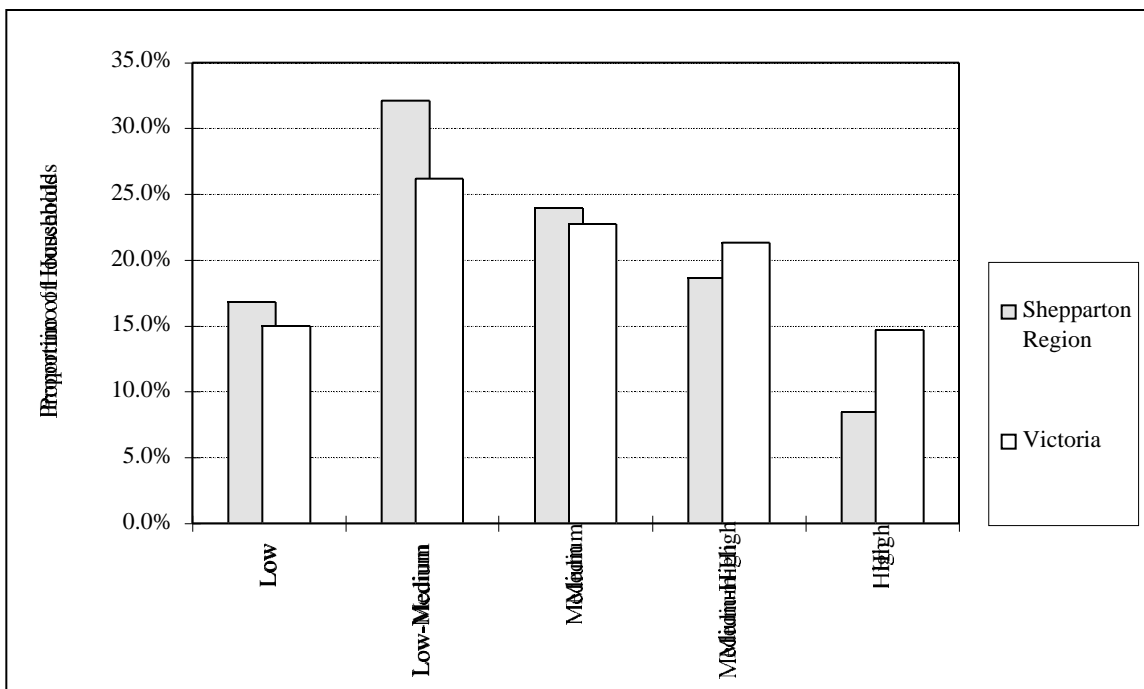
Figure 3: Annual Household Income, Shepparton Region and Victoria, 1976, Proportion of Households



(Source: ABS, 1976 Census, Catalogue 2428.0, Table 33; and Catalogue 2410.0, Table 40)

Note: Total Households, Shepparton Region = 10,506 (an additional 1,070 households provided insufficient information for annual household income to be calculated). Total Households, Victoria = 990,456 (an additional 130,828 households provided insufficient information for annual household income to be calculated).

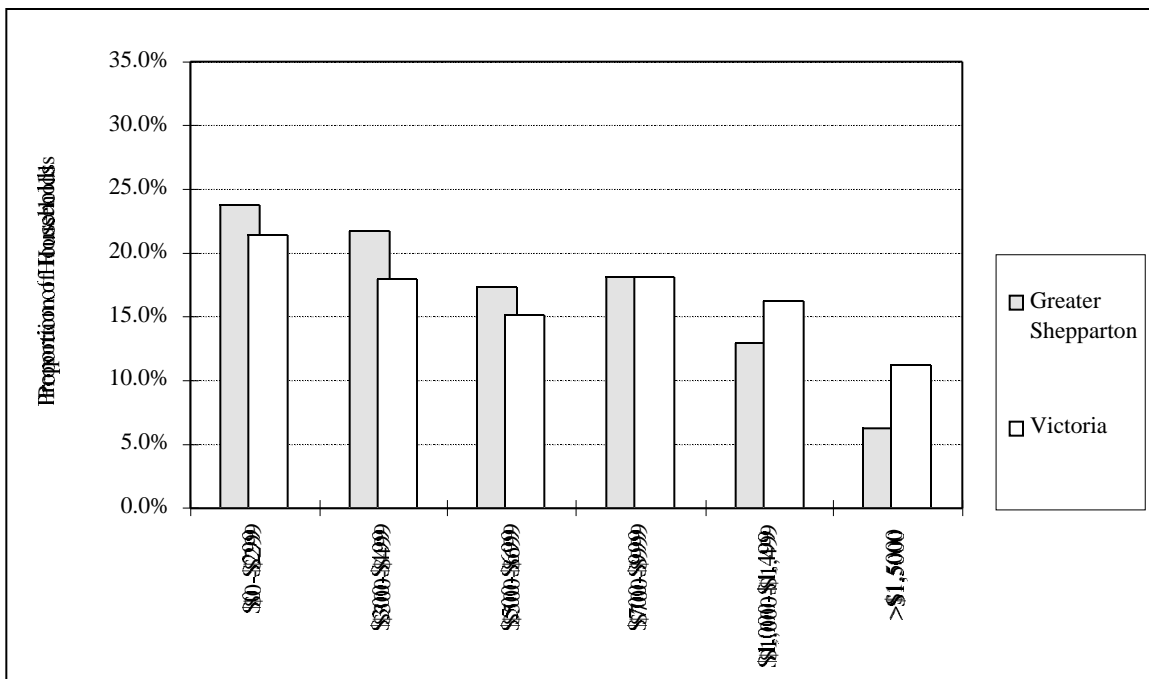
Figure 4: Annual Household Income, Shepparton Region and Victoria, 1991, Proportion of Households



(Source: ABS, 1991 Census, Catalogue 2721.0, Table B29)

Note: Total Households, Shepparton Region = 13,719 (an additional 2,819 households provided insufficient information for annual household income to be calculated). Total Households, Victoria = 1,192,662 (an additional 256,575 households provided insufficient information for annual household income to be calculated).

Figure 5: Weekly Household Income, City of Greater Shepparton and Victoria, 1996, Proportion of Households



(Source: ABS, 1996 Census, Catalogue 2024.0.030.001, Table B23)

Note: Total Households, City of Greater Shepparton = 16,459 (an additional 2,059 households provided insufficient information for annual household income to be calculated). Total Households, Victoria = 1,397,207 (an additional 172,720 households provided insufficient information for annual household income to be calculated).

The Shepparton region can be seen as an example of restructuring success, with agricultural and food processing practices dramatically changing in response to altered world markets, international investment patterns and technological developments. The effect of this ‘remarkable revolution’ (Collis, 1995b:20) on the population has, however, been differentially experienced. Employment in the agricultural sector has declined. There has been an increase (during the off-peak season) of some 450 jobs in the manufacturing sector in the period from 1986 to 1996, but compared to the level of investment in food processing plants this number seems disappointingly small. Moreover, the region’s greater proportion of households on lower incomes than the State shows little change.

In comparison to the Shepparton region the impact of restructuring in the Latrobe Valley seems quite clear-cut. Identified since the 1920s as the electricity generating powerhouse of Victoria, the region has undergone a recent and severe economic decline through privatisation and downsizing of the State Electricity Commission (SEC). The period from 1986 to 1996 saw the employed workforce in the electricity, gas and water supply sector decline by 6,000, and the overall employed workforce by just over 5,000 (ABS, 1996 Census, Catalogue 2020.0). The decrease in employment came as a sudden shock to a region more used to boom periods associated with the development of power generating projects at Yallourn (in the 1920s), Morwell (in the 1950s), Hazelwood (in the 1960s) and Loy Yang (in the 1970s). In these times, the workforce flooded into ‘the Valley’, new towns and housing were built and established townships grew.⁶ Indeed, in the early 1980s a period of spectacular expansion was forecast, as one participant in the focus group discussions commented:

We were told this Valley has a big future in the national scheme of things. We were told by our economists and our forecast projectors of government, that there were going to be 22 power stations down here, not 9, [and] 365,000 people.

The picture presented by a local planner nicely captures the distinction between the ‘boom’ period when the Loy Yang project was under construction and then brought into operation, and the recent ‘bust’ period:

I guess there are two particular periods that should be commented on. One was the incredible boom period of the late 1970s and early 1980s. We came back into the area in 1977 and the change in the area from 1973, when we left the area previously, was enormous. You could sense the change in the level of activity. There was much more activity around the commercial areas. There was building going on everywhere. There was [an] under-supply of housing; there was constant demand for new retail development and the pressures of growth were evident virtually around the whole valley. The problem from a planning viewpoint was how to provide for the need for new development . . . that period is then contrasted with the last five years, when the development rate has been virtually zero. We have probably had out-migration, we have probably had a loss of net population. We’ve got vacant houses, we’ve got vacant shops. The planning issue is how do we cope with the problems of a downsize.

The dramatic changes pointed to in this discussion are reflected in the statistical data. In the period from 1971 to 1981, when the Loy Yang project was being developed, the Latrobe region⁷ experienced growth in population that was greater than that of the State as a whole (Table 1).⁸ From 1981 to 1991 the growth rate lagged behind that of the State, but nevertheless the population steadily increased. In the years following the downsizing and privatisation of the SEC the La Trobe Shire region saw a population loss of some 3,700 people, while across the State the population increased slightly (Table 2).

Table 1: Population Growth, Latrobe Region and Victoria , 1971–1991

	Persons			Growth Rate, % Change	
	1971	1981	1991	1971–1981	1981–1991
Latrobe Region	65,878	74,132	78,437	12.5	5.8
Victoria	3,502,351	3,832,429	4,244,188	9.4	10.7

(Source: ABS 1971 Census, Reference 2.89.2; 1981 Census, Catalogue 2726.0, Table P01; 1991 Census 2721.0, Table B01)

Table 2: Population Growth, La Trobe Shire and Victoria, 1986–1996

	Persons			Growth Rate, % Change	
	1986	1991	1996	1986–1991	1991–1996
La Trobe Shire	70,529	71,145	67,444	0.9	-5.2
Victoria	4,008,801	4,233,214	4,354,126	5.6	2.9

(Source: ABS, 1996 Census, Catalogue 2020.0, Table T01; and Catalogue 2024.0.030.001, Table T01)

Note: In the 1996 Census a distinction was made between overseas visitors and residents of Australia. Prior to this this overseas visitors were included in the standard tabulations (ABS Catalogue 2901.0:225). This change in reporting is reflected in the difference in the population of Victoria for 1991 in Tables 1 and 2.

⁷ When discussing ABS census data, the term ‘Latrobe region’ refers to the combined Local Government Areas of Moe, Morwell and Traralgon Cities and Traralgon and Narracan Shires. Following the amalgamation of Local Councils in 1995 much of the area covered by these authorities became the new La Trobe Shire (see Maps 3 and 4, Appendix 2). The Australian Bureau of Statistics has produced a time series profile for this area, comparing data from the 1986, 1991, and 1996 census (where the classifications are comparable) and using the new boundary. When discussing this data the region is referred to as ‘La Trobe Shire’. There is some variation between the population of the new La Trobe Shire and the older Latrobe region: ABS estimates that in 1991 the population within the boundaries of what is now the La Trobe Shire would have been 71,145; according to the 1991 census the population of the Latrobe region was 78,437 (ABS Catalogues 2721.0; and 2020.0).

⁸ Within the region, the Traralgon Shire, where Loy Yang was located, experienced an almost 150 per cent

One important aspect of employment change in the Valley is its gendered nature. The loss of jobs between 1986 and 1996 has occurred within the employed male workforce, while the employed female workforce has increased slightly (Figures 6 & 7). Male employment in the electricity, gas and water supply sector in the La Trobe Shire declined by 5,685, equivalent to the overall decline in the employed male workforce of 5,765 (see Appendix 2, Table 2).⁹ Employment in sectors like retail trade, and finance, insurance, property and business services grew, almost matching the decline in other sectors like transport and storage, and government administration and defence (see Appendix 2, Table 2). In the employed female workforce, the big increase was in the finance, insurance, property and business services sector, offsetting losses in other sectors, like manufacturing, and electricity, gas and water supply (Figure 7, see also Appendix 2, Table 2).

It seems that the shifts in employment have impacted household incomes. In 1976 and 1991 the proportion of households in each income group was roughly comparable to the distribution for the State as a whole (Figures 8 and 9).¹⁰ In 1976, a greater proportion of households were in the medium income group than for Victoria, while a smaller proportion were in the lower and upper income groups. In 1991, there was a slight shift in the pattern with a greater proportion of households in the lowest income group, a similar proportion in the middle income groups and a smaller proportion in the highest income group. By 1996, however, a greater proportion of households in the La Trobe Shire were in the lower income groups than for the State as a whole, and a smaller proportion were in receipt of higher incomes (Figure 10).¹¹

There is no doubt that the restructuring of the SEC has had a dramatic impact on the Latrobe region, and that the impact, in the main, has been negative. The population has declined by just over 3,500, the employed male workforce has declined by just over 5,500, and incomes have decreased.

The stories of economic restructuring presented here have drawn upon statistical compilations, historical accounts, social surveys, newspaper reports and anecdotal accounts offered by our focus group participants. They are necessarily partial accounts and provide only a brief sketch of the changes in investment patterns and industry employment in each place.¹² By referring to economic restructuring as a set of stories we are not wanting to imply that they are not real or to diminish or deny their very serious effects on the livelihoods of many people. We have done so purposefully, so as to remind ourselves that these stories provide only one view of a region and its dynamics. In this study we are interested in examining the different stories told about places and people, and the effects of these stories. In the next section we turn to another set of stories about the change process.

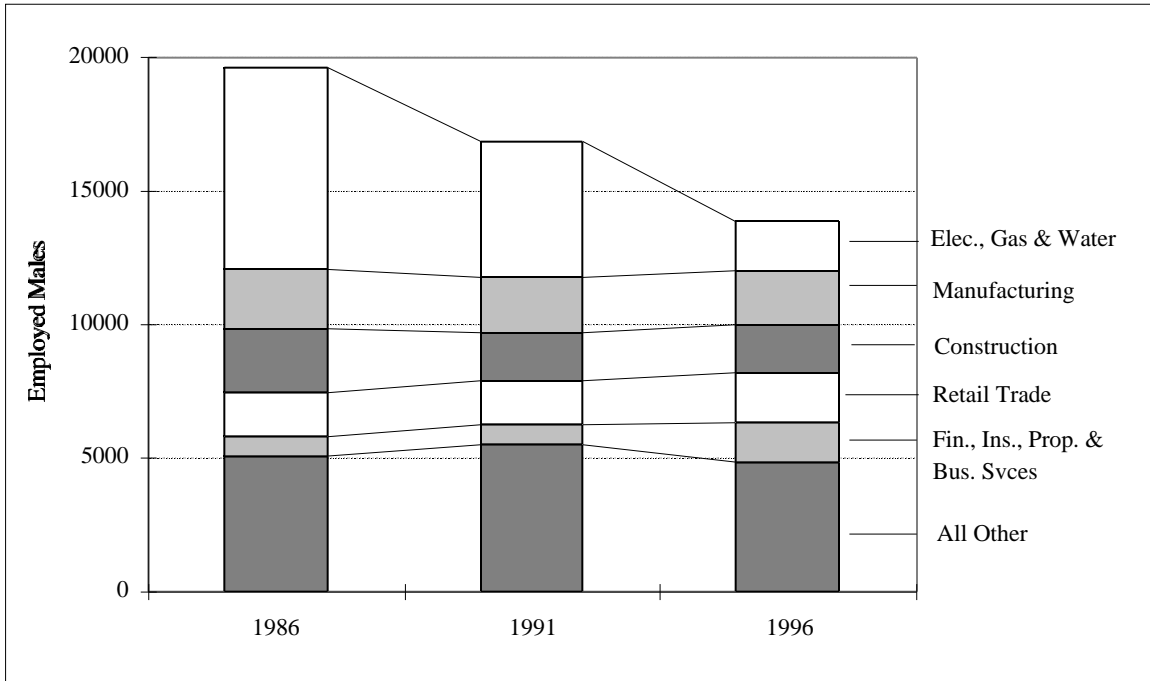
⁹ The loss of employment in the electricity, gas and water supply sector is less than the almost 8,000 referred to earlier in the introduction because of the different geographic area used by the Gippsland Research and Information Bank (GRIB). In this report we refer to ABS data for the La Trobe Shire. Also mining is excluded from the ABS category, while it is included in that used by GRIB. According to the ABS there was a loss of 260 jobs in the Mining sector in the La Trobe Shire between 1986 and 1996.

¹⁰ See footnote 2 for a discussion of the relationship between income data for 1976 and 1991.

¹¹ The age structure of the La Trobe Shire in 1996 was remarkably similar to that of the State as a whole (ABS Catalogue 2020.0; and 2.24.030.001). It would therefore seem that the greater proportion of households with lower incomes in the La Trobe Shire is unrelated to the age structure of the population.

¹² Our interest in this study is not to replicate other studies nor to attempt to present a 'complete' picture of economic change. Readers might be interested in the more detailed analyses of the Latrobe Valley provided by

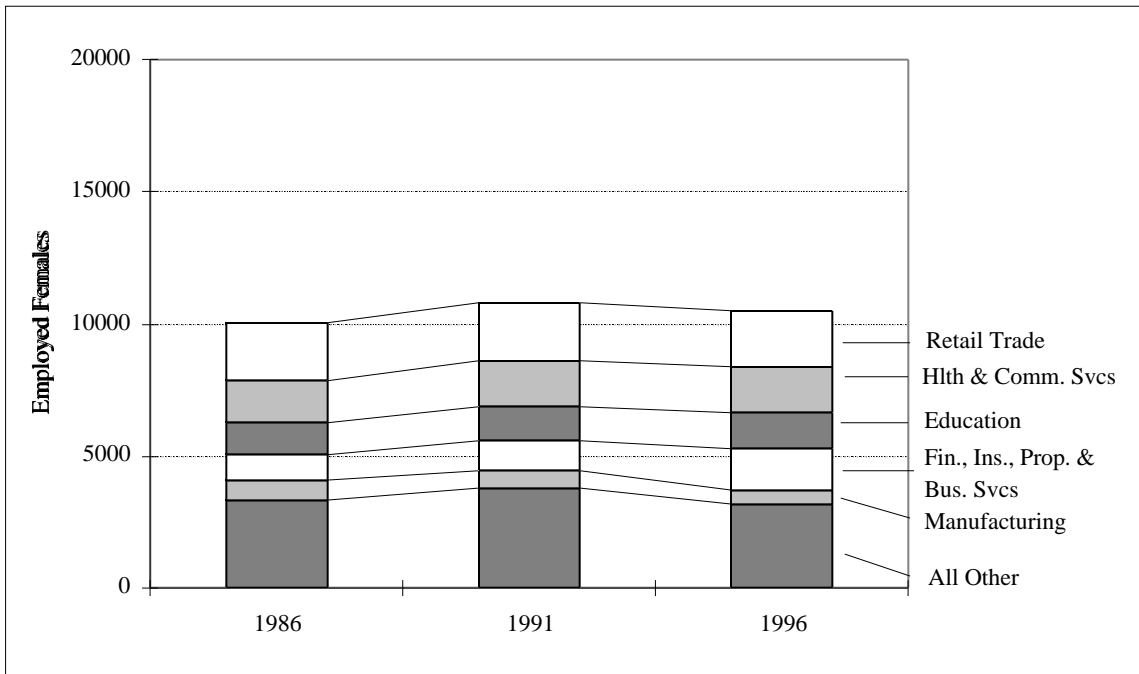
Figure 6: Male Employment, La Trobe Shire, 1986-1996, Labour Force Employed in Selected Employment Sectors



(Source: ABS, 1996 Census, Catalogue 2020.0, Table T15)

Note: See Appendix 2, Table 2 for details of all employment sectors.

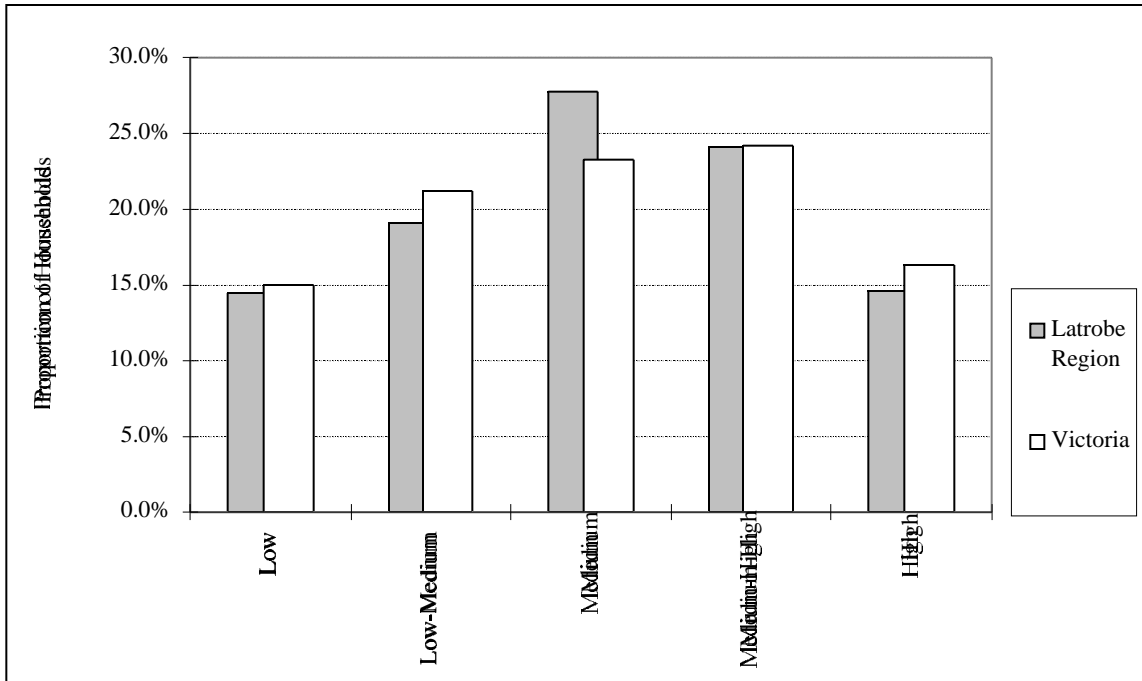
Figure 7: Female Employment, La Trobe Shire, 1986-1996, Labour Force Employed in Selected Employment Sectors



(Source: ABS, 1996 Census, Catalogue 2020.0, Table T15)

Note: See Appendix 2, Table 2 for details of all employment sectors.

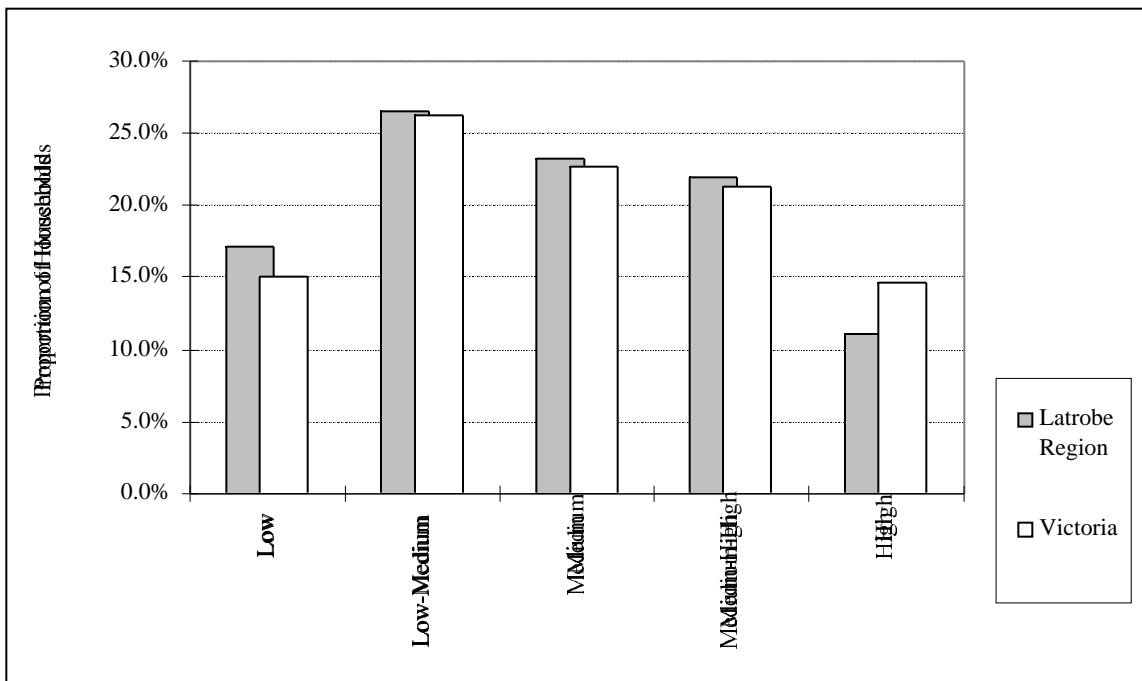
Figure 8: Annual Household Income, Latrobe Region and Victoria, 1976, Proportion of Households



(Source: ABS, 1976 Census, Catalogue 2428.0, Table 33; and Catalogue 2410.0, Table 40)

Note: Total Households, Latrobe Region = 16,406 (an additional 2,410 households provided insufficient information for annual household income to be calculated). Total Households, Victoria = 990,456 (an additional 130,828 households provided insufficient information for annual household income to be calculated).

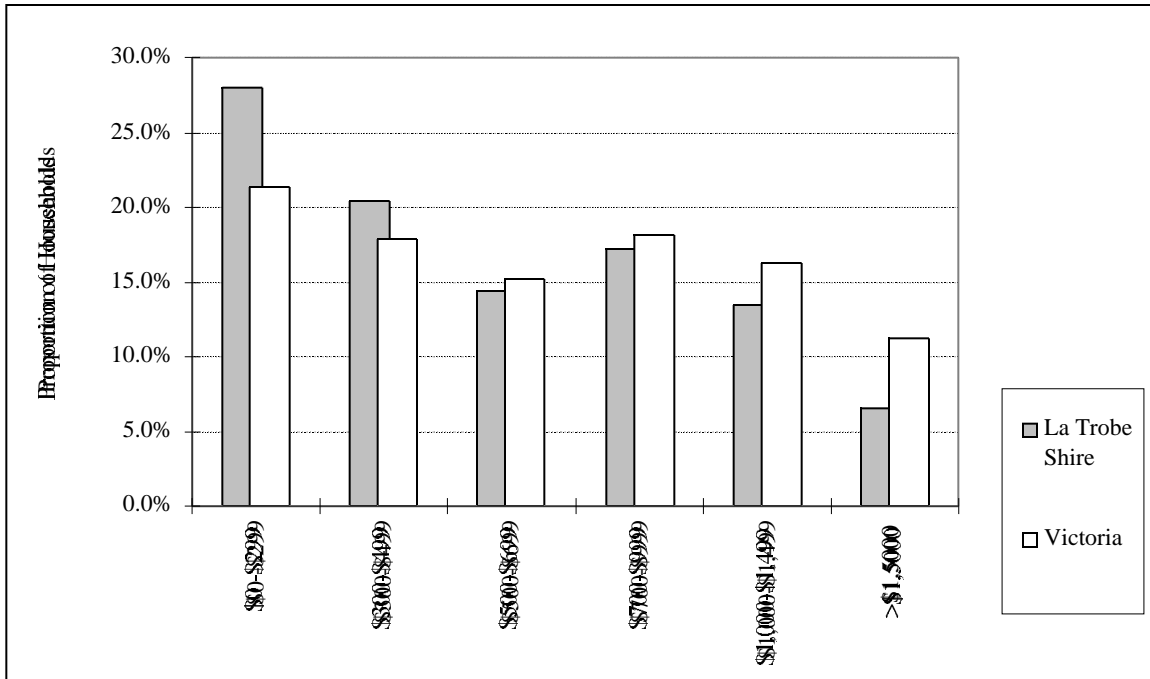
Figure 9: Annual Household Income, Latrobe Region and Victoria, 1991, Proportion of Households



(Source: ABS, 1991 Census, Catalogue 2721.0, Table B29)

Note: Total Households, Latrobe Region = 21,790 (an additional 4,944 households provided insufficient information for annual household income to be calculated). Total Households, Victoria = 1,192,662 (an additional 256,575 households provided insufficient information for annual household income to be calculated).

Figure 10: Weekly Household Income, La Trobe Shire and Victoria, 1996 Proportion of Households



(Source: ABS, 1996 Census, Catalogue 2024.0.030.001, Table B23)

Note: Total Households, La Trobe Shire = 22,025 (an additional 2,772 households provided insufficient information for annual household income to be calculated). Total Households, Victoria = 1,397,207 (an additional 172,720 households provided insufficient information for annual household income to be calculated).

3. NARRATIVES OF CHANGE AND COMMUNITY COPING

[If] it is a natural disaster or crisis that's acceptable. There would be farm families that would be forced off the farm and wouldn't get anybody coming to visit because people don't know how to deal with it. It's seen as their fault or they don't know. So floods and fires are very community building and people respond. Outside of that, like suicide [and] youth homelessness, people don't know how or blame the people involved and the community spirit is non-existent in most of those situations (Manager, Government Agency, Shepparton).

I reckon if a bushfire did as much damage as this downturn we would call it a national disaster (Anglican Priest, Latrobe Valley).

These statements from two of the focus group participants point to two different ways of naming and responding to change in a community. There are floods and fires that are readily identified as 'natural' disasters and are unexpected, highly visible and somehow seen as 'inevitable'. These are events over which people are seen to have little immediate control and to which the community, and sometimes nation, is able to readily respond with sympathy and support in cash and kind. Then there are events like redundancy, bankruptcy and homelessness that unfold more gradually and privately. These crises are often seen to be within the control of those involved and do not illicit expressions of widespread sympathy and collective support. Yet, as the two statements above suggest, the effects of these apparently slow moving, 'man-made' and perhaps manipulable events can be just as devastating as the effects of natural disasters.

Both from the ways in which change was talked about in the focus groups and from the literature on community coping, it would seem that the naming and social perception of a change event plays a crucial role in determining its impacts and the responses that are made to it. How change is represented and understood—as normal or abnormal, natural or unnatural, imposed from outside or emerging from within, as random or somehow selective—will make a significant difference to the ways in which communities and community members relate and respond to the change process. For example, in studying communities coping with natural disasters such as flood, tornado or earthquake, researchers have suggested that:

People can be very resilient to the development of new psychological symptoms even in the presence of such strong stressors as life threats, heavy personal or material losses, as well as evacuation and relocation (Bravo, Rubio-Stipec, Woodbury & Ribera, 1990:647).

The psychological responses to stressful and sometimes terrifying natural disasters have been found to be not long lasting partly because the events are deemed 'natural'. As Powell and Penick put it:

Most victims described their reactions as distressful but 'natural'; they typically did not regard themselves as psychiatrically ill or in need of psychiatric care (1983:275).

Accounts of the capacity of communities to cope with major traumatic changes are not restricted to those experiencing 'natural disasters'. Observations of communities successfully managing major changes have emerged from studies conducted in eastern Germany after the dissolution and breakdown of communist East Germany (Schwarzer, Hahn and Schroder, 1994) and in Israel after the Gulf War (Omer and Alon, 1994). It would seem that the widespread and all-affecting nature of the change, its 'imposition' from outside and the active positioning of residents as 'all in it together' may have contributed to the self-reliant attitudes that emerged. So the naming and understanding of a change event are important factors influencing its impact and community coping response.

Another significant factor to have emerged is the way a community represents and positions itself with respect to major changes or disasters. Communities can position themselves as either capable, strong and resilient and therefore able to respond to a challenge and manage the effects of change themselves; or as victims whose ability to respond is diminished, damaged or broken by the disaster's impact on community structure and who therefore require the intervention of outside professionals to manage a

response (Bravo, Rubio-Stipec, Woodbury & Ribera 1990; Durrant & Kowalski 1990; Omer & Alon 1994; Toubiana, Milgram, Strich & Edelstein 1988). The media and key outside and inside commentators play an important part in constructing and confirming these different ‘mental sets’.¹³ Durrant and Kowalski (1990) have proposed a summary of these two different representations of community coping and their relationship to different types of interventions to manage the change process (see Table 3).

Table 3: Competing Representations of Communities and ‘Intervention’ Strategies

Victim Community	Competent Community
1. Outside agencies are experts holding special knowledge regarding healing to which the community should submit.	1. The community is expert in its life, and has the ability to determine its best healing approach.
2. The community is viewed as damaged or broken by the disaster.	2. The community is viewed as oppressed by and struggling with the effects of the disaster.
3. Deficit model: Agencies seek to ‘fix’ the community.	3. Resource model: Agencies seek to build on strengths and resources of the community.
4. Insight into the dynamics of the disaster is the key goal of treatment.	4. Goals of treatment is the community viewing itself as competent and as having control over the intervention.
5. A cathartic or corrective experience is necessary to produce community change.	5. Best ‘corrective experience’ is the getting on with life in a way which best suits the community, and change will be promoted by experiencing this possibility.

(Source: Durrant & Kowalski, 1990:67)

A third factor that interacts with the other two is the actual rate of change. Alvin Toffler (1970) coined the term ‘future shock’ to describe psychological disruption resulting from the experience of too much change too quickly. Paradoxically, it is not necessarily the nature of change (that is, whether it is seen as positive or negative) that is important but the perceived rate of change that is stressful (Dohrenwend, 1978; Vinokur and Seltzer, 1975). Change that is regarded as either too rapid or too slow is said to yield the most stressful impacts.

In our focus group discussions with business and community members in Shepparton and the Latrobe Valley these three factors affecting community coping—the perception of the rate or pace of change; the naming and understanding of change; and the positioning and representation of the community with respect to change—all emerged as themes of importance. What was interesting was the way the two different regions can be seen as being similarly and differently placed with respect to each factor.

¹³ A recent complaint to the Australian Press Council by the La Trobe Shire highlights public concern over the role of the media in contributing to a community’s self-understanding. The Shire argued that following the disappearance and death of a Moe toddler, and subsequent charging of the child’s babysitter with murder, the town had been portrayed as disintegrating through the loss of jobs in the electricity generating industry (*Latrobe Valley Express* 8 Oct. 1998: 1). In other words, the community was represented as being unable to cope with the impact of industrial changes. In opposition to this view, a group of local Moe residents initiated the press complaint, and called upon the Shire to coordinate and present the submission to the Press Council. Although the complaint was not upheld the Press Council reminded the media of the ‘the dangers of appearing too ready to

3.1 Rate of change

Very sudden change was imposed on the Latrobe Valley from outside through State Government downsizing and then privatisation of the SEC. The rapidness of the change was commented on by a number of participants in the focus group discussions:

Why did this area have to be decimated in order to make it more internationally competitive? One doesn't say if you can do things better you shouldn't do them better, obviously you should, but why the rush? Why the need to absolutely decimate the workforce and the community for an industry that was already internationally competitive? There was a degree of madness about it (Local Planner).

Here it is important to note that participants did not dispute that change within the power industry was inevitable, and in the focus group discussions a shift in work-place practices and developments in technology was specifically commented on:

When I came here people were in fixed positions, in the job that you did and no way would you move them out of those positions. You go into the place I work now and people are multi-skilled, and it's at the detriment I suppose of the comrades that have left. But it was the realism of the people that they knew it had to happen (Electricity Industry Worker).

[I]t was obvious the technological change that was coming into the power industry (Union Organiser).

It was, however, the speed of the change and the way in which it was imposed on the community that was seen as problematic:

We could have spun it [the change] out over twice the time, we could have done it with—as has been said, 'We will downsize by 1,000 jobs when there are 1,000 jobs in another industry that comes on-stream'. We could have done those balancing acts that said from here onwards we can do even better in conjunction with looking after the people and the community. I mean, really, it's disgraceful! (Local Planner).

The rapid downsize was perhaps even more difficult to adjust to given the still relatively recent history of rapid growth in the Valley. As discussed in the second section, over the last 20 years many people moved into the region because of the promise of growth and prosperity. It would seem then that the Latrobe Valley has experienced a roller coaster ride in which rapid change has been an almost constant factor. It is not only the recent contraction that has caused problems—some of the issues for the community relate to the topsy turvy way in which rapid growth took place in the region:

I remember in Churchill . . . in the early eighties when they opened up the Glen Donald Estate, now that estate is quite substantial in size [and it] literally grew up overnight and the industry invested a huge amount of money providing a stock of public housing for people . . . It was great that people were getting access to quality housing but they didn't have all of the other things they needed and support, the material goods necessary to go with those houses and I don't believe we planned enough for that influx and that's the way we grew up and the way Churchill has evolved as well. People moved from different parts of the world and different parts of Australia and they've just let them be and I think there has been a great degree of dislocation for people (Regional Manager, Family Services).

In contrast, the pace of change in the Shepparton region has been more steady and spread out over a longer period dating from the market shocks of the early 1970s and continuing through with farm rationalisation, rural depopulation, plant closures and openings, technological changes in manufacturing and farming practice, and growth of the City of Greater Shepparton as a regional centre:

Shepparton is in an interesting process and it has been for the last decade and a half, and we are in

of Shepparton, with 60,000 people, but really we have a catchment area of 150,000 or 180,000 or so. We really are coming to grips with that growth (Orchardist).

Some participants were, however, more aware of the lack of change or slowness of change in their community:

Within the [last] twenty years, I mean there's been change . . . there is change in the mainstream, but I see us [Aboriginal people] so removed from mainstream culture, I see us just surviving. There is no economic base for us, there is no dollars attached to us, there is no plan attached to us . . . as far as land and as far as jobs and as far as owning stuff, businesses, it's not there. We've got a long way to go to do that. We're just surviving (Aboriginal Health Worker).

When I came here [in 1979] this electorate was considered the third poorest in Australia federally and [it had] the third lowest per capita income. A lot of casual work, a lot of part-time work and a lot of people on pensions. Unions are weak, wages levels are very basic and people are frightened to join unions (Community Educator).

In general, it appeared from the discussions in Shepparton that the actual *pace* of change had not been an important issue for the community. Perhaps because change events have occurred at more or less regular intervals they have not destabilised community structures or diminished the sense that the community can cope. The sense of a steady rate of change, however, may contribute to an individualising of change: farm bankruptcies, for example, may be more easily positioned as individual and isolated incidents rather than as part of a broader regional 'disaster'.

3.2 The understanding of change

The Latrobe Valley participants presented a relatively consistent and unified narrative of change focussed on the recent downsizing and subsequent privatisation of the SEC. This change was understood by many as a construction of government, imposed from elsewhere:

The Valley was built by the government and the government wiped their hands of it when they had the responsibility to take it on to look after it. You'll never get over what happened because the Valley is definitely an orchestrated built area. It was built to supply a need and the Valley took on the people, and the governments encouraged the people to come here, but when the hard work went on they wiped their hands of the place (Electricity Industry Worker).

The effects of the change were generally understood to be far reaching and damaging to the very culture of the community:

The changes and the subsequent decline in the power industry has caused or has changed prosperity into misery. People were employed, grandfathers and fathers and kids got jobs at the SEC and I think the SEC established the social conditions in which people lived for a long, long time . . . There were people I spoke to who were really quite traumatised that their culture or their way of life had just disappeared or at least was beginning to disappear (Community-Based Financial Counsellor).

For some, the change process had been internalised and taken on as a bodily change:

Just watching men and women over the last 20 to 25 years, their psychological health has been really profound. Men cope with their distress of the economy changing different to women. Nevertheless what happens is that both genders inevitably get treated as sick and they go into treatment either medically or psychologically and tragically. And they are on prescriptions from different practitioners and they think there is something wrong with them. (Community Psychologist)

Certainly in the Latrobe Valley change has been viewed as 'man-made'—a construction of government policy—and therefore as somehow imposed from 'outside'. It is seen as having been

manipulated by actors outside the region and as perhaps ultimately unnecessary. The general feeling among focus group participants was of disapproval of the recent changes in the region.

In contrast, change in the Shepparton region has been understood in more varied, less unified and often quite different terms. There was an element of recognition of the inevitability of some changes, for example, a shift in global markets, changed environmental understandings and the introduction of new production technologies. There was also a sense that crises or major disasters have been a feature of the past and have acted as the origins of responses and accommodations that contribute to the situation today:

Twenty two years ago there was an absolute disaster in the Goulburn Valley, cows were being shot and being thrown down into pits, milk prices dropped from 74 to 42 cents and budgets went out of the window and it wasn't much longer after that interest rates went to 24 percent so it was one thing after another . . . the farmers and/or their wives went to town and got jobs and that was the only way they survived in that time (Dairy Farmer).

We've poured irrigation water on this country for years and we have never really looked at the repercussions, the drainage problems, the salinity problems. I think in recent years, particularly the last fifteen to twenty, that's really been addressed, the work and the recognition that's gone into it (Director, Economic Development).

There was also mention of other sorts of changes that have been welcomed. A number of participants commented approvingly on the increased public role of women in the community and the greater recognition, tolerance and even celebration of the multiculturalism of the region's population:

So I think we have made some steps forward . . . as a part of that I've seen women, and my friends particularly, first of all move into the workforce at a far greater rate than our mothers in the past generation did, and now we've seen women move into the business sector (Manager, Government Agency).

Most of our third and fourth generation orchards are owned by our ethnic community (Manager, Government Agency).

From an economic point what you've got in this area is some of the best brains producing fruits and agriculture, because of the ethnic population (Manager, Aboriginal Enterprise).

The focus group discussions in Shepparton did not arrive at a central narrative of change; instead, a number of different understandings of change (and stasis) were voiced. Participants were able to talk of successful and welcome change as well as difficult and unwelcome change. There did not appear to be any consensus that the region was currently in major crisis as there had been in the Latrobe Valley.

3.3 Representations of community in the face of change

Clearly each region that we studied has experienced different types and rates of change. This was reflected in the ways focus group members depicted the major changes in their regions and discussed their understandings of reasons for these changes. Out of the discussion also emerged distinctly different representations of community coping.

In Shepparton a narrative of community competence could be seen to weave together many of the comments. Take, for example, the disaster that confronted SPC in the early 1990s. Following extraordinary losses in 1990, local shareholders voted out a board that was primarily comprised of members from outside the region, and voted in local orchardists and businesspeople (Curtain, 1993:5-6). The new board appointed a local as the new Managing Director and all managers, bar one, were replaced—mostly by promoting existing SPC employees (ibid). When the company's bankers indicated that they might not extend funding commitments, the workers, in the face of opposition from Victorian Trades Hall Council and the ACTU, agreed to accept a package of cost-cutting measures.

Throughout this period of restructuring the local community was positioned as the agent best able to respond to and manage the change. This narrative of community competence and independence featured in the focus group discussions of the region more generally, as a rural consultant commented:

I also think that this community—just thinking back to my local government experience—that it's really open to working in [with] whichever government's in at the time and turning the rules or the policies or the dollars around for the best here. And whether its SPC taking on all the awards and restructuring and all those sorts of policies, or whether its local government saying we don't want another regional development board but we will have the money and this is our structure and this is what we will do.

Similarly, a dairy farmer noted:

I picked up an annual report from our local factory from twenty years ago. Shareholders had just over a million dollars in funds invested in that factory and today they have 50 million, and I think we have just decided that we can't afford to have other people in charge of our destiny and that is why we are reinvesting this money, to try and keep control of our products.

It should be noted that this sense of competence appears to resonate with traditional images of independence often associated with family farmers and immigrants—the small movers and shakers who dare to challenge fate and big masters to forge a livelihood. Exactly how widespread this sense of community competence was amongst town-dwellers was less clear from the focus group discussions.

In contrast to the Shepparton region, a narrative of victimhood seemed to be predominant in the Latrobe Valley region. Participants in the focus group discussions spoke of the dependence of the region on state and federal levels of government, of being lied to by governments, of the hopelessness engendered in people and of their diminished ability to fight back or exert their rights:

Our governments could have been honest with us . . . not one of those people [in State or Federal Government] at any stage said the Valley is going to change. What they said to us was, "You go along with this and everything will be all right. We are going to bring new businesses down, everything is going to be great" . . . [but] the end result was the government wasn't honest with us as a community. They never at any stage to my knowledge got all the community players together and said, "Look the change is going to be horrific" (Union Organiser).

There seems to be more assaults since the economy has changed. There seems to be a real assault on people and there is a sense of hopelessness about how to address that (Community Psychologist).

The Latrobe Valley is very important when our resources have been important. So when the expectation was for a higher demand for their power generators the Latrobe Valley became extremely important. Our resources are important. Our community, politically, is not important. One of the big difficulties that we've got is that the Latrobe Valley community doesn't really have control of the factors that affect us. Most of those are imposed by international trading situations, our demand for natural resources and so on, but we don't have control over the weight and conditions under which those are used and developed. When the downsizing occurred we didn't get tradeoffs, we didn't get a penny (Local Planner).

We needed tradeoffs. We never identified them, we never asked for them, we never pushed for them (Local Planner).

Woven into these comments are images of assault, vulnerability, childlike naivety (impotence) and powerlessness. These images position the Latrobe Valley community as needy and requiring care.

In this section we have explored some of the axes of difference between the Shepparton and Latrobe Valley regions as expressed in statements by focus group participants about the rate of change, the naming and understanding of change and the positioning of their communities with respect to change.

It would seem from the focus group discussions that the Latrobe Valley community has experienced a sudden and dramatic change—the reverse of the earlier boom periods—that has stripped it of its capacity to cope with the consequences; whereas, the Shepparton community, having encountered a series of changes over a period of time, seems to be more resilient and able to respond to change.

We found it interesting to note that despite the different narratives of change and coping expressed in the focus groups in the two regions when the discussion turned to an assessment of the impacts of change in each community there were some surprising similarities between the Latrobe Valley and Shepparton. For us this raises the critical issue of the decisions and choices that are made in the research process. One research approach might be to continue to differentiate the two regions and downplay the similarities between them. This comparative approach lends itself to a project that seeks to establish causal relationships between elements—for example, between the different forms of community coping and the severity of impact of the changes. In this research project, however, we are concerned *not* to reinforce differences between the Latrobe Valley and Shepparton by setting them alongside each other as competitors vying for the position of most well-adapted, or most successful community. We are more interested in intervening in the practice of regional competitiveness by finding points of commonality between ostensibly very different regions and opening up a conversation between them. In the next section, in which we turn to the impact of change in each community, we therefore diverge from the pathway laid out in 2 and 3 and allow the similarities between the Latrobe Valley and Shepparton to emerge.

4. ASSESSING THE IMPACTS OF CHANGE

Despite the significant differences between the two regions in terms of the pace of change, the type of change, and the ways in which participants from each place represented their community as 'coping' with change, there was an interesting consonance around the view that many of the impacts of change across the two regions had been negative. Whether in response to economic 'success' or 'crisis' the issue of social polarisation was of concern in both places, as was the issue of economic security.

One of the effects of the 'successful' industry restructuring that has occurred in the Shepparton region was identified by focus group participants as an increasing social polarisation in terms of people's income and assets:

[W]hat we are seeing in the area, and its a great concern, is we are starting to see a clear delineation between the haves and have nots (Orchardist).

[T]here has been a widening gap between the rich and the poor, both in assets and in income, particularly within the housing field. I think its fairly representative of the human services area generally. Probably the last 5 years or so we've seen the change in the profile of the people that are coming to see the systems. We are seeing a lot more people from middle incomes, more educated middle class type people that you normally wouldn't see 15 to 20 years ago, coming to seek our assistance in our services, particularly families, people with 40 to 50 year old breadwinners (Housing Worker).

Participants also identified that the restructuring had not brought uniform benefits, but had impacted some groups like farmers differentially, creating polarisation within groups:

Its already been mentioned that there's been some 500 million dollar investment into new factories . . . Our dairy farmers and horticulturists are matching this improved productivity . . . but the gap is getting wider. We've got a group of farmers that aren't able to keep pace and [are] unable to meet the pace because of lack of investment and not enough knowledge to take the next step (Director, Economic Development).

Focus group participants noted that restructuring within the region had resulted in changing work practices that had lead to increasing insecurity of employment:

Once we had security of employment, people would be able to commit themselves to a twenty year housing loan. They knew they had a job for twenty years and they'd continually upgrade. Our housing stocks were continually being improved, etc. This has all dried up because people are very reluctant to commit to long term borrowings. I think we are going to pay a big price for that in the future (Director, Economic Development).

One of the reasons in my field that I feel more people are looking for that short term work is things like CCT [Compulsory Competitive Tendering], contracting, [and] subcontracting. There's the feeling of insecurity amongst families about being able to pay the bills and therefore grab every bit of work that you can. People that I've known that I would never think would decide to go into the seasonal work, I've asked them why and they've said, "Well, you never know what's around the corner". The fear that's come into our community without our security (Manager, Government Agency).

A third area of concern of Shepparton focus group participants was the hidden social costs associated with restructuring:

[W]hat we find [is] that those that are in work are working harder and longer hours [and the] job security issue becomes paramount to them and the financial issue[s]. The down-side to this is that is they have less time to devote to their family, and less time to devote to the community . . . we are working like blazes to enjoy the benefits of life but we don't have the time to enjoy them when we get them. It's really the cat chasing its tail . . . and all of us are seeing huge problems, increases

amount of poverty that is in this area. We don't want to know about it and it's getting worse (Orchardist).

I think this increased work pressure which has been mentioned before is affecting our communities generally. We've got people that haven't got the time to devote to the service clubs, the community interests. Once you'd find business people that were able to be away from their businesses, because things were going quite well we can go and devote some time to the community, the Lions club, the Rotary club, football club, cricket club, whatever it may be. People haven't got time for this any more (Director, Economic Development).

Participants in the Latrobe Valley focus groups talked about the effects of downsizing and privatisation in terms of loss, lack, depletion, demoralisation, grieving and shock that affected the community uniformly. Along with the loss of employment that has been discussed in section 2, participants noted that there has been the loss of what was once an identifiable regional culture and identity associated with the security of employment offered by the SEC:

The SEC stood for Slow, Easy and Comfortable, but for all its shortcomings in that respect it's what kept this community going, it's what made the family, it's what made the stores flourish. It kept the economy going and the money went round and it stayed here and moreover those people that had a job at the SEC (and were seen to be SEC bludgers by some on the outside) had a sense of worth and a sense of value, they had a job to go to. It might have been making lead sinkers for the SEC social club when there was no work out of recycled lead, but they had a job to go to and they felt worthwhile (Councillor).

I can remember growing up in a very secure environment. There was a real sense of security and a great sense of belonging and I have seen that gradually eroded. The individual senses a loss of importance. There's an absence of security, there's no sense of permanency (Businesswoman).

A local businessman noted that when the growth that was predicted in the early 1980s with the building of additional power stations turned to a downsizing of the workforce, business people were as demoralised as those that were unemployed:

People went out on limbs and built shopping centres and grew their businesses probably beyond where they should have. They've also been caught with real estate that they'd purchased through expansion that didn't happen and even buildings were over-specified to cater for growth that didn't happen, speculative real estate that didn't happen. I guess that was probably the beginning of the downturn in the social break-up of this place, where the people that were the doers and shakers have become as despondent as the unemployed today.

Another businesswoman noted a different effect:

There is a greater sense of competition now, there is less trust, even between individuals, and on a greater scale between people in business. They do not want to work together any more.

In both regions there was a sense that the promise of economic development had not been realised, that people had pulled their weight and done what was necessary economically speaking, but the social benefits that should have flowed from development were not forthcoming:

The problem is not everybody succeeds. What I'm saying is that we have a less[er] level of unemployment in the [Goulburn] Valley but it was totally unacceptable in the first place. We've got a higher migration of our youth going to capital cities now so that's not impinging on our backyard, it's impinging on Footscray or Fitzroy or wherever (Orchardist, Shepparton Focus Group).

We were encouraged to change, people took that as it was going to improve it and said "Well let's do it". But the other bits haven't happened now and people's self esteem is dropping and dropping (Businessman, Latrobe Valley).

What is striking about the cases of Shepparton and the Latrobe Valley is the pervasiveness of the view that economic restructuring has impacted negatively on the social fibre of regional communities. It comes as no surprise that the Latrobe Valley, reeling from the impact of massive job losses, should feel that it has been hard done by the processes of restructuring and privatisation. But it is intriguing that even in the seemingly competitive and successful region of Shepparton, with its impressive track record of attracting multi-million dollar investments from overseas and expansion in the quantity and value of food products exported from the region, people should also feel that restructuring has hit the community hard. What comes out of the discussion of change in both places is a significant and overarching expression of disillusionment about the benefits said to accrue from economic restructuring undertaken in the name of ‘development’.

Whereas once there was a secure belief that investment growth in the ‘formal economy’ had a positive, supporting and amplifying effect on society at large, there is now the worry that this growth in the formal economy bears little relationship to dynamics in the ‘social economy’. In fact it might be undermining the very fabric of associations, voluntarism, family and neighbourhood networks, social contracts of trust, reciprocity and community. The social polarisation that appears to be accompanying economic growth in the current period is perhaps one of the greatest threats to the viability of an active and resilient society. The focus group participants suggested that the assumed positive relationship between economic growth in productive investments, regional employment, social well-being and the viability of regional communities is now under question.

Furthermore, in a climate where the role of government in the provision of a social safety net is retracting and where communities, families and non-governmental organisations are being called upon to provide many of the services that were once the responsibility of the state sector, the realisation of a changed relationship between economic growth and social well-being is a cause for much concern. At the very moment when voluntarism is being called upon most, the ‘traditional’ volunteers are stressed out and overworked or are being bombarded by so many different organisations and causes that they hardly know where to begin.¹⁴

[R]ecently, in a community group, people talked about which meetings they would decide to go to because they felt that there are so many causes in our local town. And one woman said “There are so many assaults by the bureaucrats, I don’t know which one to choose. I don’t know whether to look at working to get a youth resource centre, or try to address the sexual assault issues in this town or put some energy into the milk factory and get them to be more open and communicative to me”. And I thought that’s really true (Community Psychologist).

In rural and regional Australia the contradictions of uneven development are at present very visible as indicators of growth, decline, prosperity, destitution, wealth, poverty, viability, unsustainability all jostle together to confront and confuse. What does seem clear from this research is that in the face of this complex and bewildering situation the story of economic restructuring offers a coherent but often disempowering narrative of change. In the course of the focus group discussions we were concerned not to leave the conversation at the point where an intimate knowledge of the ‘problems’ could become ossified and thereby gain more discursive purchase. In an attempt to illicit other stories about coping and strengths in the face of, at times, overwhelming despondency, we asked the participants to reflect upon what the community had done well and what its success stories were. In the next section we explore these glimmers and fragments.

¹⁴ And yet ‘progressive’ governments such as that of Tony Blair in the UK are highlighting the previously invisible role of social capital in maintaining the nation and are hinting at the increased role this sector might

5. 'OTHER' REPRESENTATIONS OF REGIONAL COMMUNITIES

The stories of success and hope that emerged when the discussion was shifted onto the terrain of community strengths and innovations were numerous. They came stumbling out in a disorganised manner that suggested that these stories were not readily nor often told. In the face of dominant narratives of economic change perhaps such stories are positioned as less important or effective. It is clear that there is a lack of a language to talk about this understanding of community capacity; yet, as we will argue, this understanding has the potential to contribute to the ability of a region to deal effectively and innovatively with the consequences of social and economic change. In this section of the paper we discuss some alternative visions of the Shepparton and Latrobe Valley communities and a range of the stories of success and hope that emerged in discussion.

In opposition to the familiar image of the Latrobe Valley as the powerhouse of Victoria one focus group participant highlighted the region's artistic and cultural merits:

I have always seen the Latrobe Valley as being a lot like the renaissance, a lot like Florence in terms of its population, in terms of its demography, in terms of the kinds of people who have made up the life in the Latrobe Valley (Councillor).

This alternative vision of the Latrobe Valley can be seen as enabling different stories of community coping and strength. One story focused on artistic ingenuity and enterprise, which has generated employment opportunities:

[A] Skillshare program in Traralgon that works out of a railway shed had \$10,000 that they invested in a portable mill and put it on the back of a ute and [it] travels around the Gippsland area milling trees on site for wood for furniture. Now this group of people is employing unemployed and re-training [them] under the Skillshare program and is setting up this company called WoodWorx as an independent company from Skillshare with this sawmill. Now they are in a situation that if you want that sawmill out at your place you've probably got a two or three month wait because they can't keep up with the work. What they want is thirty thousand bucks and a block of land on which to stack their timber and if you can give them that they will employ 10 more people . . . [so] the likes of the WoodWorx company is still struggling with their \$10,000 sawmill and their old ute and they are employing 10 or 15 people but there is still these other 10 people waiting on the outside, waiting for their opportunity to get in (Councillor).

A second story focused on the contribution of a migrant family to the region:

The Dasma company, which is a local company owned by a family of Italian immigrants who came to the Latrobe Valley, have won the contract for waste management—not only for this municipality but for four other municipalities in Melbourne. They are employing Latrobe Valley Enterprises who are [intellectually] challenged people to provide all the waste paper and keep the waste paper services up for the waste management proposal. Not only that, Dasma is a classic example of putting the money back into the community. These people have a huge interest in the local soccer club which is now a national soccer club and a lot of their money comes back into the community and is put in here locally (Councillor).

By momentarily stepping outside the prevailing narrative of the Latrobe Valley as a region devastated and demoralised by the restructuring of the power industry 'other' stories of hope and success became visible. In the face of the loss of some 5,000 jobs in the La Trobe Shire these examples may seem trivial and minuscule, but they point to the possibility of forms of economic and social development that build on the strengths, associations and visions of people within the region—their artistic and sporting abilities and interests, familial and cultural associations, and the capabilities of 'challenged people'.

One focus group participant even suggested repositioning the unemployment that resulted from the downsizing of the SEC as a valuable regional asset rather than as a drain on the economy:

Basically, we're all in it together. But in the various communities that I've looked at the only ones that had that sense that "we're all in it together" was Whyalla. Over in Whyalla there was a perception that "Ok, they weren't as dependent as they were on the BHP payroll". The BHP payroll was still there, but at a reduced level. The other major player was the Department of Social Security. Basically the Department of Social Security's unemployment benefit, sole parent benefit and others provided such a major income to the town that people on unemployment benefits were actually valued. They didn't want them to leave.

People on unemployment benefits consistently they'll spend their money in town, they won't go outside to purchase anything. Their children go to local schools, they go to local doctors, they use the local hospital, they use local dentists. Which again maintains some sort of viability of the community's infrastructure. But I don't think in places the importance of all members of the community is adequately recognised. And in this region, I think that probably applies as much as anywhere else.

Yet at the same time there is a tendency to scapegoat those very groups. I think their actual value to a community isn't well recognised. I think the tendency is still there to scapegoat them. And when governments start to talk about changes to unemployment benefits I think some communities need to look very, very seriously about what that will mean to them. And I think in country Victoria any change to social security benefits for the unemployed will impose enormous damage (Manager, Government Agency).

By reframing the unemployed as a regional resource the usual representation of them as economically dependent and non-contributing fades, and a new understanding potentially emerges. The unemployed might be seen as a community asset—capable of contributing to the cultural, sporting, environmental, social *and* economic well-being of the Latrobe Valley.

A shift in emphasis away from the dominant story of economic restructuring also opens up new ways of thinking about the strength of the community and its capacity to cope with change:

I just think of the small community in which I live in. Recently all the changes that have occurred there on a social level have risen from the bottom up. There is a jazz club that's started in the town and that's really lifted [people's] spirits, and lots of people are going, and families. Often the bureaucrats . . . keep implementing these interventions down on the town and there is huge resistance by these people, they don't trust them at all. But most of the things that take place actually come from the bottom up, so they [the community] scabble around for bits of money to run this and yet its the [institutions] who are saying, "We know what's best" (Community Psychologist).

The potential is still here, one wonders why some people haven't bothered to move, why haven't we all left, why are we all still here, why do we still call this home? Because the potential is still here and the points that were raised about the spiritual life of people in the Latrobe Valley and the points that I have raised about the cultural life in the Latrobe Valley . . . [these are] considerations that have never really been worked on through all of this and they are still there (Councillor).

In these excerpts the La Trobe Valley community is endowed with potential and seen as possessing the resources and capabilities for dealing with the effects of economic restructuring. This raises an important question: to what extent might new and additional paths to economic development be generated by giving emphasis to this representation of the community as possessing strengths and resources and as able to cope with the effects of change, in place of the dominant representation of the Latrobe Valley as having been decimated and devastated by the restructuring and privatisation of the SEC?

In the Shepparton region stories of community strength and capacity also emerged. Notably these stories told of new forms of partnership and association that enabled community assets to be mobilised. A project to improve water quality and reduce salinity in the Shepparton Irrigation Region was initiated by farmers in a local Landcare group (J. Irvine, 1998, pers. comm., 31 March). The project drew support from local councils, the regional development corporation, state and federal

government departments and agencies, union and industry groups, and land owners. A submission for funding to the then Keating Federal Government's Regional Task Force was successful. One focus group participant claimed that the success was due to the high level of community organisation:

We brought this community together to identify to a certain extent, strengths [and] weaknesses. Out of that process we identified that sustainability and drainage underpins our whole economy and we are recognised by the Federal Government for that. We picked up a 6.2 million dollar grant which all went toward drainage, treatment of effluent from industry, and water supply to a world quality standard to industry for food processing and so on. ... The Federal Government did compliment the area, said it was the best organised community they encountered in Australia for its submission. The next biggest grant was 2.3 million. (Director, Economic Development)

Currently the project is funded by local, state and federal governments. One major component involves the building over a thirty year period of 1,998 kilometres of community drains through private farms at a cost of \$41m (Shepparton Kyabram Rodney Development Corporation, 1994:5).¹⁵ Land owners contribute to this cost and maintain the drains. One of the focus group participants described the Community Surface Drainage Scheme in terms of a partnership:

Well your partnerships come virtually from the land owner, to the local government, to the state and federal government. So it's a total partnership of all governments and certainly a number of government departments have a very strong involvement, like the Department of Agriculture in particular and your previous State Rivers and Water Commission which has now been broken up into various water boards (Director, Economic Development).

A second partnership in the Shepparton region was initiated by a group of businesspeople who were concerned about levels of youth homelessness, as one focus group participant described:

The problem was raised when a couple of people said, "This is not good enough". They went to Rotary and got them to agree to sponsor them, went to big business and got them to agree to chip-in. They then went to the government and said, "We're going to fix the problem and this is what money we're putting on the table, now you match it". This was a partnership that worked. Essentially something like \$100,000 a year is being spent (Orchardist).

Funding was thus secured for 'The Bridge', a youth access program and drop-in centre that aims to link young people up with existing government services like housing and health. In both these examples the Shepparton community presented itself as capable and confident, as having strategies for overcoming problems of salinity and youth homelessness by building connections between people from very different backgrounds and social circumstances, and mobilizing community associations and assets so that financial input from outside sources could be put to good use.

These two projects seem to be indicative of other initiatives in the Shepparton area, including the Clever Food People Conference held in 1993 which drew 800 people to listen to Edward de Bono and brainstorm ideas for how to reshape the food industry in the region; the Jobs for Christmas program, a collaborative project between the council and Commonwealth Employment Service which, in two years, placed 1,500 unemployed people in jobs over the Christmas period; and a ti-tree plantation project on an old dairy farm which seeks to address the problem of salinity and develop new forms of agriculture (E. Dobson, 1997, pers. comm., 5 June).

Other more general forms of community involvement were also commented on in the focus groups:

One of the positive things that we have in this area is the use of volunteer labour. I think it is often overlooked, there is a massive amount of volunteer hours put in by people in lots of different ways—not only at the coalface, but in committees of management, and we're looking at the churches, the guide groups, community care and so on. That's something that's utilised very well here (Housing Worker).

Within the Aboriginal community strengths that are being built on were also identified:

Well, we've got a big community, I mean, its a large community, if it was smaller it might be different but the size we are . . . we stick together. So I guess that is a fortress on its own and we do it at that level. We have a few people that can see a larger picture than what this group of people can see and that is also sometimes a threat because those few people that see this larger picture of where the group of people are going, is frightened because they are not ready for that. So this strength lies with this group of people here, like Rumbalara [Aboriginal Cooperative] itself (Aboriginal Health Worker).

One of the areas that Rumbalara has expanded and is moving in is with the new football club, that's part of their change. Another area is they're running a program called the CDEP [Community Development Employment Project] program which employs about 50 people so that's severing its ties with Rumbalara and it's going to go totally separate, so that's another move in a good direction (Manager, Aboriginal Enterprise).

These excerpts position the Shepparton community as having the strength and capacity to respond to change, as being able to initiate new schemes and programs, and generate widespread community support and involvement. Our research reinforces what many in the focus groups in Shepparton alluded to, that the commitment and creativity of the Shepparton community is an important resource to be foregrounded and drawn upon when considering strategies for dealing with the effects of social and economic change.

In asking the focus group participants to concentrate for a moment upon success stories, an interesting change in group mood was effected. The authoritative 'voice' associated with discussions of restructuring and its effects was replaced by a more tentative and speculative tone. The group mood began to lighten and expressions of agreement and enjoyment began to overtake the attitude of serious and attentive listening to each other that had characterised all the sessions. While the stories were slow in coming initially, they began to tumble out as each example sparked off another recollection. Participants began to identify innovative social projects and alternative economic enterprises built upon the capacities of their regional communities. They started to map out the shape of the still largely viable social economy that is the asset base of their respective communities. They pointed to the ways in which these projects built partnerships across difference and worked with markets, the state, social organisations and individuals in innovative ways. Time constraints and exhaustion put an end to what had the potential to become a very interesting auditing exercise. In the final section of this working paper we reflect upon the implications such an audit might have for rethinking regional development strategies.

6. IMPLICATIONS FOR REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT

This pilot project has sketched out a set of relationships between processes of economic and social restructuring, dominant narratives of change, a range of stories about community coping and examples of positive attempts to offer solutions to the problems that face regional communities. The research has identified a number of fruitful avenues for future research and regional action and has highlighted the important role the discursive understanding of change plays in envisioning possible regional futures.

A regional landscape can be seen as comprised of many features, including cultural, artistic and creative relationships, diverse social groups and associations that enrich and enliven the lives of community members, as well as large scale businesses and a multitude of family, sole-person, collective and small scale enterprises that create and transact products and employ people in the formal and informal economies. We have represented economic restructuring as a story in this project as a way of dislodging it from its position as the principle, and sometimes only, way of defining regional identity and understanding regional change. The restructuring of economic activity in the formal economy is but one way of defining regions and understanding regional change. Our concern is that one of the effects of this story is to make regional communities, including those as disparate as Shepparton and the Latrobe Valley, seem powerless, making it easy to forget or ignore the many real strengths and capabilities of people in regional communities. The predominance of the story of economic restructuring potentially disables communities from responding to social and economic change, limiting the possibilities for new and different regional futures.

It is this story of restructuring that provides the background to the intense psychic investment in competing for large corporate one-off industrial developments by non-metropolitan regions hit by economic changes. Regional economic development strategies are usually focused upon attracting large scale investors into the region in the belief that such investment will have a positive flow through to the community via direct employment, multiplier effects and contribution to a growth-oriented and buoyant economic atmosphere. The need to maintain viability of the regional economic base through large scale replacement investment is prioritised by local governments and their development initiatives concentrate upon infrastructure development and the offering of incentives and benefits to relocating and new businesses.¹⁶ This research suggests other avenues for enhancing regional development might be better able to generate the positive social effects often expected (but not always realised) of large scale investments.

In the U.S. Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) have utilised a process called ‘community assets and capacity mapping’ to formalise recognition of the existing and potential contribution the social economy can make to local social and economic development. This community based research process involves identifying the skills and capabilities of individuals (artistic and sporting abilities, for example); familial, cultural and community associations and networks (such as church, migrant and Aboriginal groups, voluntary community groups, and sporting clubs); and the institutions and businesses located in the region (including hospitals, educational institutions, government agencies and local businesses). It works to mobilise these assets and capacities in the form of local enterprises that take a variety of traditional and alternative forms. This research and planning intervention has much to offer a reconceptualisation of regional development.

The assets-based community development (ABCD) approach¹⁷ provides one way to re-imagine a regional economy in which the formal sector of large corporations and medium and small capitalist

¹⁶ Despite the interventions in ‘market forces’ that such incentive strategies represent, there still appears to be a strong belief among regional economic development practitioners that the ‘market demand’ for high technology and ‘competitive’ wages and conditions (including environmental and tax conditions) allows little room for bargaining over employment levels when it comes to accepting the offer of company relocation or start-up.

¹⁷ ABCD has been pioneered by Kretzmann and McKnight in the ghettos of North America cities but is

enterprises are seen as but one strata or segment. Alongside these enterprises and existing in complex interrelation with them are self-employed businesses and service providers, alternative businesses centred upon non-market oriented dynamics and/or distinctive ethics (including stewardship of the environment, aesthetic values, cooperativism, social incorporation and so on), the voluntary sector, and networks of labour exchange between families, generations, neighbours and members of various associations. In this re-visioned economy it is not only the market mediated, commodified, capitalist transactions that are included, but also those that do not operate via markets, are provided in kind or take place in non-capitalist settings. In the view of Kretzmann and McKnight (1993), when the assets and capacities of communities are more actively mobilized a diverse array of economic development initiatives are generated and any financial resources obtained from 'outside' can be much more effectively utilized.¹⁸

The Bridge youth program in Shepparton is a good example of an initiative that drew upon regional assets and capacities. From the concerns of a few individuals, approaches were made to community organisations, local businesses and finally government, and substantial funding was secured. The process of identifying assets and capacities frequently involves, as one participant in the Latrobe Valley focus group suggested, reconfiguring a group like the unemployed, who are often seen as non-contributing and even an economic drain or burden, as a community strength, possessing diverse skills and abilities, and involved in a range of associations and networks. For example, the Dasma company in the Latrobe Valley employs intellectually disabled people and the WoodWorx company in the Latrobe Valley employs and trains unemployed people. These two examples highlight that while regional assets and capacities are utilised in voluntary work, they can also form the basis for regional economic development initiatives. New and successful enterprises can be developed by drawing upon the assets and capacities that already exist within a region.

There are many different ways of portraying the situation and condition of non-metropolitan regions in the current context. This research project has presented a number of different representations and explored, with the assistance of community spokespeople, their effects on visions of regional capability and potential. The major finding of this pilot project is that despite different experiences of economic restructuring, regional communities feel burdened by a sense of powerlessness in the face of change. They embrace traditional strategies for regional economic development with little expectation that widespread social goodwill result from 'success' defined in investment terms. At the same time, regional spokespeople were able to point to the resilience of their communities and the potential local capabilities that could be mobilised to enhance social as well as narrowly defined economic development. Future research should be directed at working with these communities in the process of mapping their regional assets and capacities and facilitating new development strategies.

countries. Its application to regional development is something that the authors of this working paper are interested in pursuing.

¹⁸ A number of parallels exist between the ABCD approach to economic revitalization and that put forward by social capital economists such as Robert Putnam (1993) and in Australia, Mark Latham (1998). What is of most relevance to this project is the sense that the degree of vibrancy of the social capital environment is a direct and positive influence, if not determinant, of economic viability in the formal economy. So rather than the direction of flows and filtered effects being seen as from the formal economy to the social economy, both approaches

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APPENDIX 1

Appendix Item 1(a) Research methodology

Rationale

This research project originally proposed to document the negotiation of social and economic change in four contrasting regional centres. Albury-Wodonga was selected because of its history as planned state-supported growth centre; Geelong, because of recent industrial restructuring; the Latrobe Valley, because of the recent restructuring and privatisation of the State Electricity Commission (SEC); and Shepparton, because of recent high levels of investment in the agricultural and food production sectors. It was thought that these centres provided a suitably diverse range of social and economic circumstances and restructuring outcomes to encourage discussion of development paradigms currently informing regional development strategies. As only half the project funding requested was granted, just two regional centres were studied. It was decided to focus on the Latrobe Valley and Shepparton, both a similar distance from Melbourne, but with two very different experiences of economic restructuring.

Qualitative and quantitative research methods were used to build-up an overall picture of the form and impact of changes in the Latrobe Valley and Shepparton.

Qualitative methods

Focus group discussions were used as the qualitative research tool. Two focus group discussions were held in each region (in Shepparton on June 5 and 6, 1997; and in the Latrobe Valley on June 19 and 20). One group was comprised of business and industry leaders, while the second included community leaders. Potential participants were initially identified through local newspaper stories, other publications and networks known to the research team. After an explanatory phone conversation to ascertain if a potential participant was interested in being involved, a letter was sent confirming details of the project (Appendix Item 1(b)). A snowball sampling technique was also used, and potential participants were asked to nominate other business, industry or community leaders who might be interested in being involved in a focus group discussion. Attempts were made to ensure that people involved in a range of organisations and businesses, and known to be of different political persuasions were approached.

In the Shepparton region, 27 people were initially approached by telephone, 22 letters were subsequently sent, resulting in 7 people attending the business and industry group, and 6 attended the community group (see Appendix Item 1(c) for a list of participants). Several people who had agreed to participate but had to withdraw at the last minute provided written statements. In the Latrobe Valley region, 26 people were initially approached, 22 letters were sent, and 9 people attended the business and industry group, and 6 attended the community group. The authors of this report attended all focus groups, and Katherine Gibson and Arthur Veno acted as the primary facilitators.

Undoubtedly the method of selection resulted in a 'biased' group. Those people who were interested in and concerned about the effects of social and economic changes in their communities were prepared to spend time attending the focus groups. However, it is also likely that this method of selection brought together people who had thought deeply about issues relevant to their communities and could provide greater insights than people with a more cursory interest. This is not to say that those who attended the focus groups were similar. A range of ages, lifestyles, racial groups, income groups and political affiliations were represented.

Participants were asked to present a 2 minute opening statement reflecting on the social and economic changes in the last 15 to 20 years that they thought were most significant for their region. The researchers found this strategy to be useful for a number of reasons:

- It served as an introductory tool that provided information about each person.
- Participants had to listen to the stories of each person, even those who may have been known to have very different political, economic and social allegiances.
- The presentations were additive with participants building on earlier presentations, frequently pointing out the similarities or differences between their own and other's stories, expanding on previous stories or providing a different point of view. A knowledge of the region was actively constructed through the focus group process.
- Participants put considerable thought and time into preparing their statements prior to the focus group and so were well able to contribute to the open discussion that followed the opening presentations.

The focus on social and economic changes of the past rather than on current events was also a useful strategy. Current conflicts and tensions were bypassed and participants could speak openly, relieved of any special responsibility to argue for a particular case or position. In one Latrobe Valley focus group participants, for example, with very different political allegiances found themselves agreeing in the main with each other's analysis of past events.

The focus groups were videotaped, and the intention is that an edited videotape be produced as a resource for other regions undergoing social and economic change. In the initial approach participants were told that that the focus groups would be videotaped. Only one potential participant expressed a concern about this, stating that this would restrict what could be spoken about. This participant did, however, attend; and although initially requesting a private interview after the focus groups, was satisfied that the discussion had been free and open. None of the potential participants who did not participate identified the videotaping as an impediment, but it may have been a factor in their decision. The videotaping produced an interesting effect in terms of the dynamics of the focus group. Whatever differences may have existed between participants they were all located in the same position as the 'objects' of the camera's gaze (and to some extent as the objects of research). A feeling of group camaraderie quickly developed as, for example, participants (and researchers) nervously joked about the presence of the cameras. But participants also commented that they quickly forgot about the cameras.

In terms of the work of the researchers, the videotapes have proven to be an excellent resource to use for analysing the focus group discussions. The videotapes were reviewed several times, and key and recurring themes identified. Selected segments that best illustrated the themes were then transcribed. This working paper is structured around the themes identified by the researchers.

Quantitative methods

Quantitative data were also used to build up a picture of economic and social changes in the Latrobe Valley and Shepparton. Only variables that illustrate or illuminate an important aspect of social and economic change are discussed in the working paper. Other data that were interrogated are available on request from the authors.

The primary source of quantitative data was the Australian Bureau of Statistics Census of Population and Housing for the census years between 1971 and 1996. Originally it was intended that only census data up to 1991 would be used, however when the 1996 data became available during the writing-up of this working paper it was decided to use this data set also. Changes to the local government boundaries of Victoria in 1995 meant that two different geographic areas are used in this study. A number of small local government areas that existed prior to 1995 are combined to produce two regional areas relevant to this research project: the area referred to in this report as the 'Latrobe Valley Region' is comprised of the Cities of Moe, Morwell and Traralgon, and the Shires of Traralgon and Narrengon (see Map 2, Appendix 2); and the area referred to as the 'Shepparton Region' is comprised

of the City of Shepparton and the Shires of Shepparton and Rodney (see Map 1, Appendix 2). With the amalgamation of Victorian shires and councils in 1995 two new areas became relevant: the 'La Trobe Shire' (see Map 4, Appendix 2) and the 'City of Greater Shepparton' (see Map 2, Appendix 2). Recognising that the shift in boundaries poses problems for research that seeks to make comparisons over time, the Australian Bureau of Statistics has produced time-series profiles based on the new local government areas that compare data from the 1986, 1991 and 1996 censuses (where the classifications are comparable). The time-series profiles for the La Trobe Shire and the City of Greater Shepparton are also used in this report.

The variables from the census interrogated in this research were:

- population changes
- age/sex structure of the population
- individual and household income
- labour force status
- employment in industry sectors
- birthplace of residents.

Alongside the difficulties produced by the amalgamation of local government areas, there are often shifts in the questions that are asked, or in the way in which results are presented that limit the usefulness of census data for comparing variables over a twenty year period. For example, questions about income were not asked until 1976, and then in 1996 respondents were asked to record their average *annual* income, not their average *weekly* income as had been the practice in previous censuses.

Department of Social Security data on pension and benefit recipients for the years 1986, 1991 and 1996; and data from the Victorian Injury Surveillance System at Monash University for the period September 1995 to January 1998 were also interrogated. This second data set is of limited use in this study because it has only been collected since 1995.

One participant in the focus groups, a pharmacist, pointed to the possibility of alternative indicators of social and economic change, and its impacts. She noted that there had been a dramatic increase in the last few years in the number of clients with health care cards, in other words, in receipt of a government benefit or pension, or on a very low income.

Appendix Item 1(b) Explanatory letter sent to potential participants

Monash University Letterhead

«FirstName» «LastName»
«JobTitle»
«Company»
«Address1»
«City», «State», «PostalCode»

26 May 1997

Project Title: Social and Economic Change in Regional Communities

Following our discussion by phone on Monday, 26 May 1997, I would like to confirm your participation in a group discussion on social and economic change in the Shepparton region over the last fifteen to twenty years.

The discussion group is part of a research project on rapid change in regional communities. The aim of the project is to explore the ways people make sense of and respond to social and economic restructuring. We hope that the results of the project will be useful for other regional communities going through a process of rapid change.

The research is funded by the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute. The other Monash University researchers involved in the project are Associate Professor Katherine Gibson (Department of Geography and Environmental Science), Dr Arthur Veno (Director of Research, Centre for Police and Justice Studies), and Dr Peter Farago (Department of History and Politics).

The discussion will take approximately two hours of your time, from 3pm to 5pm on Thursday, 5 June 1997. I will let you know closer to the date the venue in Shepparton.

As I discussed with you on the phone the group's discussion will be videotaped. This videotape will only be viewed by members of the research team, however sections will be edited into a shorter video presentation. This shorter video would be used for illustrative purposes, say for a community workshop on economic and community development strategies, or a conference presentation, or to show a group of students. Other researchers would have access to this second video. Statements from the original videotape may be used in written materials. You would not be identified by name, but your position would be. We will ask you to approve our description of your position. If you think that your contribution to the group's discussion depends on your disclosure of confidential material then you should not participate. If you agree to participate and find that you do discuss confidential material we will delete this from the original video, at your request. This confidential material will not appear in the edited video or in written work.

The discussion will involve a group of approximately ten people with different attitudes to the change process. If you feel so emotionally involved in the process of change that you might be unduly distressed by this research process you might want to reconsider participating. Participation in this research is entirely voluntary, and if you agree to participate, you may withdraw your consent at any time by simply informing any member of the project. You may also decline to participate in any part of the discussion, by simply not making a response.

One of the researchers in this project is mandated by law to disclose crimes reported to him to the appropriate authorities. Therefore, please do not disclose any unresolved criminal matters unless you are willing to have these matters reported to authorities.

If you have any queries or would like to be informed of the aggregate research finding, please contact me on 03 9905 4617, or Associate Professor Katherine Gibson on 03 9905 2934, or fax 03 9905 2948.

Should you have any complaint concerning the manner in which this research is conducted, please do not hesitate to contact The Standing Committee on Ethics in Research on Humans at the following address:

The Secretary
The Standing Committee on Ethics in Research on Humans
Monash University
Wellington Road
Clayton Victoria 3168
Telephone (03) 9905 2052 Fax (03) 9905 1420

Thank you for your participation in this project.

Jenny Cameron
03 9905 4617

Appendix Item 1(c) List of focus group participants

(Italics denote male participants)

Shepparton, Community Group

Aboriginal Health Worker
Church Volunteer
Community Educator
Housing Worker
Member, Disability Group
Youth Worker

Shepparton, Economic Group

Dairy Farmer
Businesswoman
Director, Economic Development
Manager, Aboriginal Enterprise
Manager, Government Agency
Orchardist
Rural Consultant

Latrobe Valley, Community Group

Anglican Priest
Community-Based Financial Counsellor
Community Psychologist
Councillor
Regional Manager, Family Services
Manager, Government Agency

Latrobe Valley, Economic Group

Businessman
Businesswoman
Councillor
Editor, Local Newspaper
Electricity Industry Worker
Local Planner
Former Employee, Government Agency
Pharmacist
Union Organiser

APPENDIX 2

Table 1: Employment by industry sector, City of Greater Shepparton, 1986, 1991, 1996, persons aged 15 years and over

	1986			1991			1996		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, & Hunting	2,175	1,028		2,110	970	3,080	2,052	913	2,965
Mining	21	3	24	22	3	25	26	6	32
Manufacturing	1,933	567	2,500	1,872	651	2,523	2,151	798	2,949
Electricity, Gas, Water	340	25	365	193	26	219	301	69	370
Construction	1,019	173	1,192	858	150	1,008	1,035	138	1,173
Wholesale Trade	767	312	1,079	900	341	1,241	931	373	1,304
Retail Trade	1,690	1,667	3,357	1,621	1,690	3,311	1,660	1,847	3,507
Accommodation Cafes & Restaurants	207	284	491	206	353	559	267	405	672
Transport, Storage	613	134	747	598	143	741	635	152	787
Communication	247	84	331	184	78	262	203	104	307
Finance & Insurance	297	281	578	294	350	644	241	317	558
Property & Business Services	424	291	715	453	327	780	674	513	1,187
Govt Admn., Defence	376	255	631	403	280	683	248	255	503
Education	704	848	1,552	595	847	1,442	585	989	1,574
Health & Community Services	360	1,311	1,671	384	1,365	1,749	411	1,633	2,044
Cultural & Recreation Services	156	107	263	148	122	270	138	122	260
Personal & Other Services	274	236	510	247	260	507	359	343	702
Not Classified and Not Stated	351	206	557	741	623	1,364	375	256	631
Total	11,954	7,812	19,766	11,829	8,579	20,408	12,292	9,233	21,525

(Source: 1996 Census, Catalogue 2020.0, Table T15)

Table 2: Employment by Industry Sector, La Trobe Shire, 1986, 1991, 1996, persons aged 15 years and over

	1986			1991			1996		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, & Hunting	582	268	850	525	253	778	517	261	778
Mining	501	20	521	553	22	575	241	22	263
Manufacturing	2,268	775	3,043	2,124	651	2,775	2,071	520	2,591
Electricity, Gas, Water	7,503	521	8,024	5,074	393	5,467	1,818	167	1,985
Construction	2,414	265	2,679	1,779	202	1,981	1,735	185	1,920
Wholesale Trade	458	196	654	560	217	777	666	236	902
Retail Trade	1,587	2,226	3,813	1,618	2,206	3,824	1,851	2,103	3,954
Accommodation Cafes & Restaurants	190	446	636	253	525	778	329	573	902
Transport, Storage	518	105	623	457	116	573	432	97	529
Communication	198	169	367	159	172	331	208	191	399
Finance & Insurance	281	456	737	277	502	779	288	785	1,073
Property & Business Services	486	542	1,028	499	649	1,148	1,205	862	2,067
Govt Admn., Defence	445	475	920	546	650	1,196	371	521	892
Education	684	1,186	1,870	645	1,309	1,954	715	1,359	2,074
Health & Community Services	395	1,547	1,942	426	1,702	2,128	424	1,682	2,106
Cultural & Recreation Services	109	159	268	135	167	302	173	205	378
Personal & Other Services	333	325	658	279	366	645	383	400	783
Not Classified & Not Stated	668	370	1,038	980	710	1,690	428	295	723
TOTAL	19,620	10,051	29,671	16,889	10,812	27,701	13,855	10,464	24,319

(Source: 1996 Census, Catalogue 2020.0, Table T15)

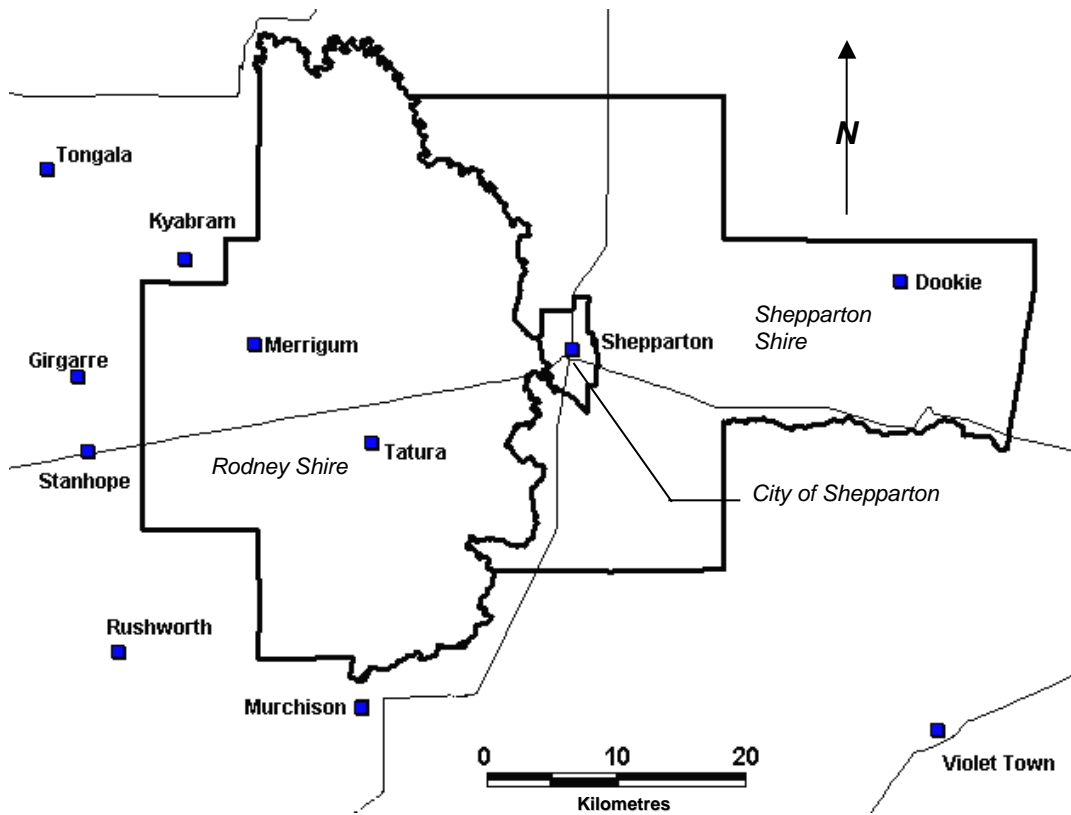
Table 3: Employment by Industry Sector, Victoria, 1986, 1991, 1996, Persons Aged 15 Years and Over

	1986			1991			1996		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Totals	Males	Females	Total
Agriculture, Forestry, Fishing, & Hunting	53,933	26,744	80,677	47,948	22,608	70,556	49,267	23,657	72,924
Mining	4,484	920	5,404	4,656	977	5,633	4,383	1,148	5,531
Manufacturing	223,060	95,732	318,792	202,776	86,490	289,266	215,839	91,190	307,029
Electricity, Gas, Water	33,408	3,929	37,337	22,637	3,029	25,666	11,103	2,305	13,408
Construction	94,013	14,182	108,195	82,946	13,749	96,695	96,667	13,815	110,482
Wholesale Trade	68,111	28,950	97,061	75,871	35,813	111,684	78,545	36,791	115,336
Retail Trade	118,608	111,959	230,567	118,955	122,369	241,324	127,371	133,458	260,829
Accommodation, Cafes & Restaurants	21,095	23,605	44,700	27,129	32,396	59,525	32,677	39,559	72,236
Transport, Storage	67,991	14,864	82,855	59,159	15,603	74,762	55,450	17,788	73,238
Communication	26,566	9,263	35,829	24,164	10,166	34,330	28,677	14,171	42,848
Finance & Insurance	39,000	38,989	77,989	39,423	45,004	84,427	34,676	42,702	77,378
Property & Business Services	59,412	46,613	106,025	68,665	57,491	126,156	102,897	83,348	186,245
Govt Admn., Defence	63,189	32,779	95,968	56,834	37,181	94,015	40,569	31,093	71,662
Education	47,220	74,016	121,236	44,494	78,266	122,760	45,331	85,788	131,119
Health & Community Services	32,851	104,298	137,149	35,342	118,402	153,744	37,233	137,890	175,123
Cultural & Recreation Services	13,592	11,614	25,206	15,458	14,831	30,289	22,678	21,808	44,486
Personal & Other Services	29,328	22,845	52,173	29,924	25,991	55,915	34,808	30,486	65,294
Not Classified & Not Stated	46,320	30,004	76,324	72,046	57,768	129,814	33,504	26,208	59,712
TOTAL	1,042,181	691,306	1,733,487	1,028,427	778,134	1,806,561	1,051,675	833,205	1,884,880

(Source: 1996 Census, Catalogue 2024.0.030.001, Table T15)



Location Map

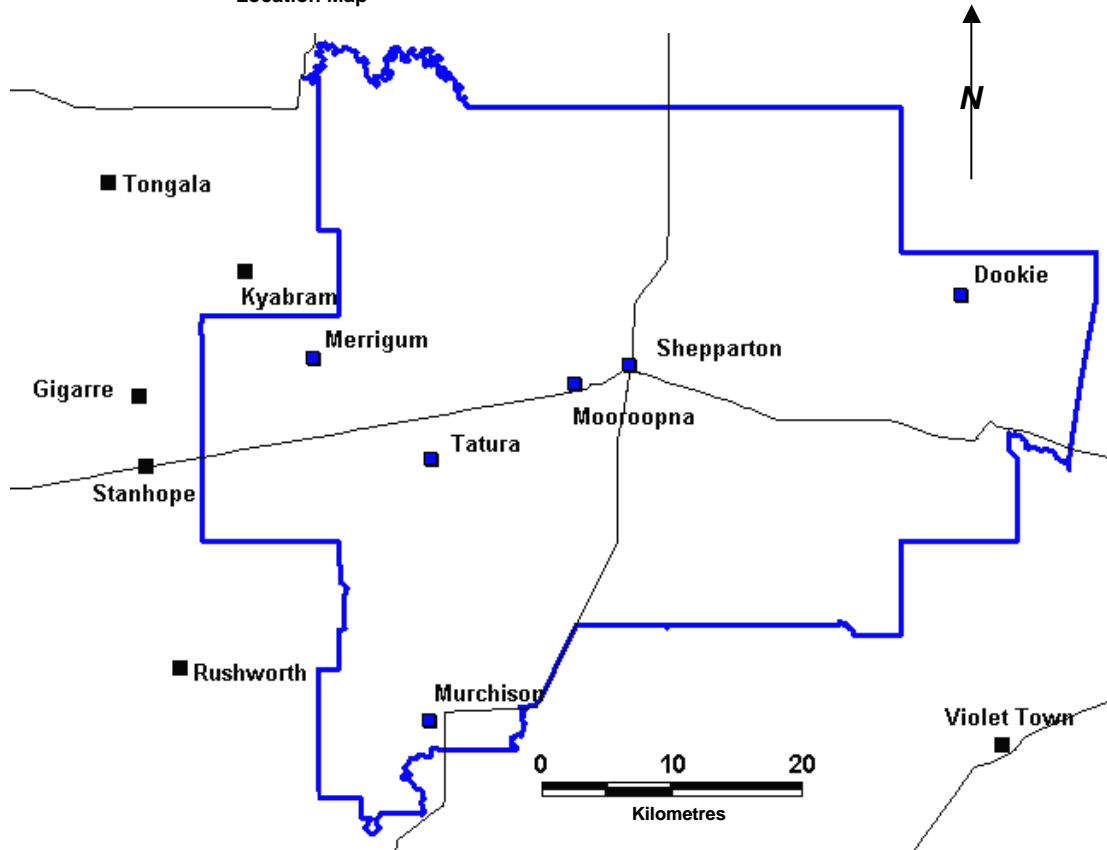


Map 1: Shepparton Region, 1991
(Amalgamation of City of Shepparton,
and Shires of Shepparton and Rodney)

Source: 1991 Census, Catalogue 2721.0

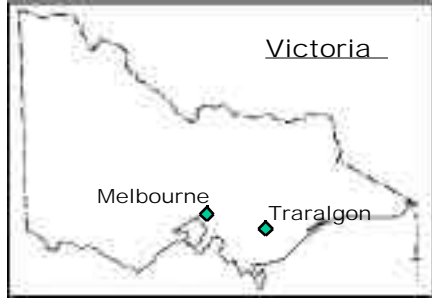


Location Map

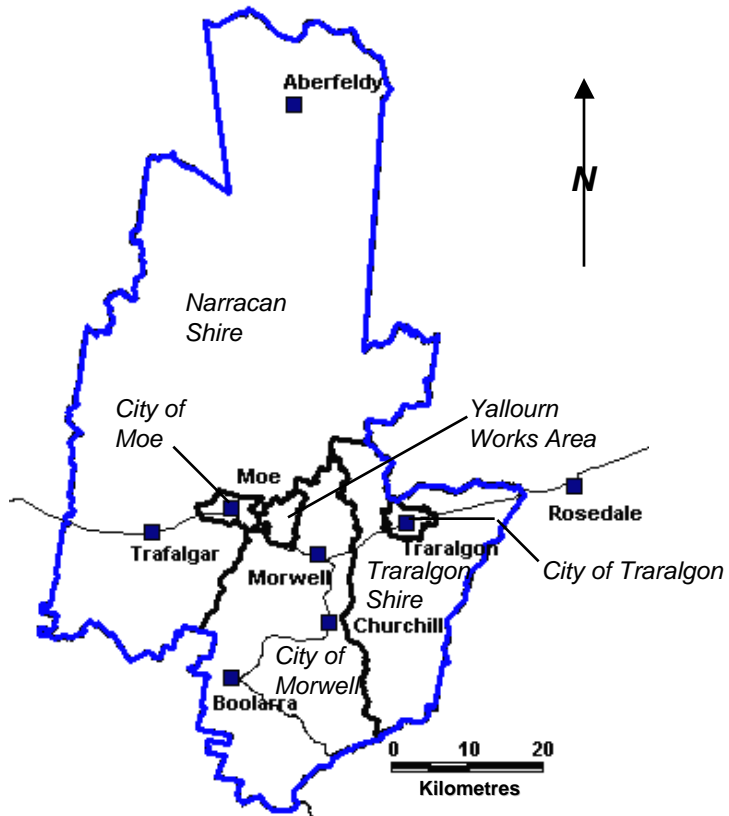


Map 2: City of Greater Shepparton, 1996

Source: 1996 Census, Catalogue 2019.0.30.001

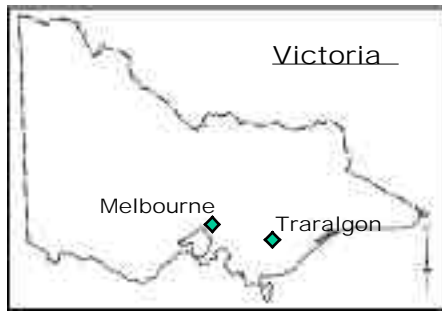


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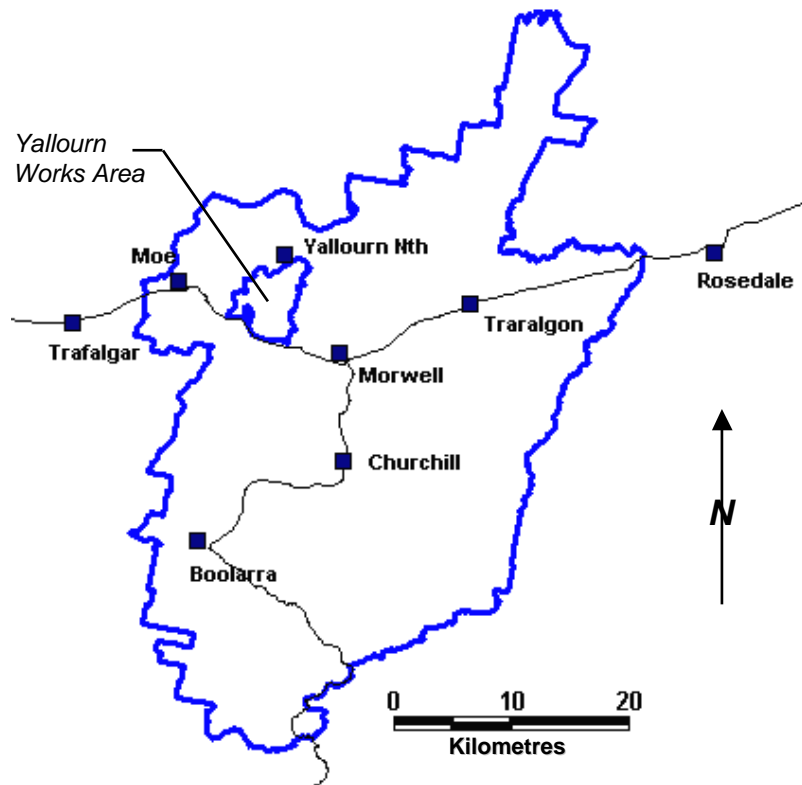


Map 3: Latrobe Region, 1991
(Amalgamation of Cities of Moe, Morwell and Traralgon;
Shires of Traralgon and Narracan; and Yallourn Works Area)

Source: 1991 Census, Catalogue 2721.0



Location Map



Map 4: La Trobe Shire, 1996

Source: 1996 Census, Catalogue 2019.0.30.001