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ADR in rural Australia

Bridges to understanding — building community consensus

Rhiân Williams

This article reviews initiatives that have been started by women in agricultural communities in Australia, together with a snapshot to give a flavour to their experiences.

Earlier this year the Foundation for Australian Agricultural Women (FAAW) undertook a series of pilot projects aimed at increasing the skills of rural women in managing public discussion processes. The seeds of this project had been sown at a meeting between members of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation and the leaders of the three peak rural women's organisations — the Country Women's Association, Australian Women in Agriculture and FAAW. The women began the meeting by telling stories of themselves; as women, as mothers, as grandmothers and, finally, as leaders. They identified that many of the priorities of rural women, be they indigenous or non-indigenous, are shared. They also identified that it is important that women play a key role in getting communities to grapple with the difficult issues, and that dialogue between all groups is essential if genuinely sustainable solutions are to be found.

Inspired by this meeting the President of FAAW, Val Lang, decided to look for a project that could bring together indigenous and non-indigenous women and increase their skills and leadership capacities and thus benefit their communities. Funding was secured through the Office of Status of Women (under its National Women's Non-Government Organisations funding program) and the project was under way. The first pilot was held in Coonawarra in South Australia and 15 women attended. They included vigneron, local councillors, health workers, water catchment board members and South Australian Farmers' Federation representatives.

The second pilot in Gunnedah in New South Wales involved 14 women, including cotton growers, catchment management committee members, health workers, and

members of various rural training councils, the NSW Farmers' Federation and ATSI, and Rural Fire Brigade officers. The final pilot in Canberra brought together 14 women who were identified as leaders in their respective fields and States or Territories and who could promote the training program in their respective organisations. They included permaculturalists, National Farmers' Federation representatives, members of the Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation, the Australian Local Government Women's Association, the Women's Industry Network (Fishing), the National Women's Justice Coalition, a representative from an Aboriginal Elders Group and representatives from the Country Women's Association, Australian Women in Agriculture and FAAW.

As can be seen, these three pilots brought together an amazingly diverse group of women. This diversity was seen by the women as a great strength and an opportunity to identify areas of common ground. In Coonawarra, for example, one of the women who worked as a health worker explained that when working with her elders she would always sit beside them and that this was a more culturally appropriate way of working. This sparked feedback from a woman who ran soil conservation workshops with farmers that if she held the workshop in the paddock, with the farmers leaning up against a fence and side by side, and she stood alongside them, she had noticed they were far more likely to be receptive to the information than if the workshop was held in a classroom type setting. This in turn led to the women considering that perhaps the traditional setting for the public meeting — the school or town hall — was a stumbling block to the success of meetings. They considered the importance of meeting settings where the environment put people at ease and enabled them to discuss issues in ways they felt most comfortable with. ➤

'The final pilot in Canberra brought together 14 women who were identified as leaders in their respective fields and States or Territories and who could promote the training program in their respective organisations.'

➤ All of the women felt that the first casualty of a community in conflict is listening. They considered that current decision-making and consultation methods push communities into forming lobby groups that compete to lobby decision-makers to make decisions favourable to their group. The resulting decisions are unlikely to meet genuine community needs, and yet if everyone complains about them this is taken as a sign of success rather than a failure of process. The challenge for communities is to transform these adversarial interactions into a mutual search for information ensuring that the interests of all members of the community are fairly represented in any solutions and decisions. The women felt that to those outside a community dispute, issues may appear trivial. People may seem to be behaving irrationally or unreasonably and solutions may appear blindingly obvious. These same perceptions are shared by most within the community and only serve to alienate individuals from one another as people compete to point out the unreasonableness or the triviality of the viewpoints of the others and the obviousness of their preferred solution.

The participants in the pilots felt that a key to transforming community disputes was the realisation that all individuals and groups need respect, affirmation and acknowledgement. They saw the role of the facilitator as one who assisted communities in moving from adversarial to collaborative decisionmaking processes by challenging the communities to draw on their mutual expertise to solve community problems, rather than advantaging particular groups. The women also felt that there is a tremendous level of knowledge and expertise in communities that often remains unharnessed by outside experts who come in, diagnose the problem, prescribe the solution and leave. They saw the greatest challenge for a facilitator as one of getting the community not only to harness but to trust its own expertise. The feedback from all participants was exceptionally positive and,

in particular, the opportunity to learn from others was seen as a critical part of the success of the program. All involved in this project have been keen to see the program promoted to rural communities throughout Australia. This enthusiasm is further evidenced by the fact that women who participated have organised further workshops, including one in Cardwell, far north Queensland in December 2000 and a series in south east South Australia in February 2001.

As the facilitator for these pilots, I gained a tremendous amount of insight into the difficulties facing our rural communities. As I write this article the women I worked with in Gunnedah are cleaning up from recent floods and the women in Coonawarra are facing a possible locust plague. The issues they are dealing with — water allocation, native vegetation protection, genetically modified crops, increasing salinity, trade reform and deregulation, loss of services and infrastructure and native title — are amongst the most challenging facing our nation as a whole. The strongest message that I have taken from this project is that rural women both indigenous and non-indigenous, want to meet these challenges head on and standing together. ●

Rhiân Williams is a facilitator and trainer in private practice. In 1991 Rhiân was invited to be the moderator at the Australian Children's Hearing. This hearing was one of a series of international hearings which culminated in the Global Children's Hearing at the United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development. She also facilitated a week long conference of young Australians designed to elicit young people's responses to both the United Nations' Convention on the Rights of the Child and the Australian Government's response to it.

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