NETWORKING THE NORTHERN RIVERS THROUGH CTC@NSW

Lynne De Weaver
Southern Cross University

ABSTRACT

The CTC@NSW program was jointly funded by the NSW State and Commonwealth Governments in 2000. To date, over 60 new Community Technology Centres (CTCs) have been funded in small, rural and regional communities throughout NSW. During this same period, seven CTCs, with sixteen outreach locations, were established in the Northern Rivers, an 8th centre at Clunes, was funded under an earlier program but later joined the CTC@NSW network. To be eligible for funding under the CTC@NSW program, applicant communities had to meet specific criteria and prepare a comprehensive business plan that clearly demonstrated how they could establish and maintain a viable business within their community during the three years of funding as well as after grant funding had been expended. A great deal of community consultation and business planning was required in the application process and the volunteers on the various committees who undertook this work did so on their own time with varying levels of skill. They spent countless hours in achieving, what for them was a successful outcome, e.g. getting the seed funding for which they had applied. The key issues that emerged in the process were; the capacity of the organizing committee to meet all the requirements of the application, their ability to articulate community needs, their business acumen and their level of commitment to the concept of establishing a CTC as a means of promoting economic development in their communities.

THE NORTHERN RIVERS - A MICRO COSM OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT ISSUES

The Northern Rivers Region of NSW represents a microcosm of regional economic development issues. This is especially evident in the area of equity of access to information and telecommunications technology. According to the 2001 Census figures, the Northern Rivers Region of NSW has a population of 262,216 with growth occurring only on the coast. Salt (2003, p.xv) says that Australians have now adopted ‘the culture of the beach’ as their preferred lifestyle as evidenced by the emergence of the coastal regions as the most desirable place to live in Australia.

Invest Northern Rivers, formerly the Northern Rivers Economic Development Board states on their Website, http://www.investnorthernrivers.com.au, that, “Population growth is shifting the region onto a high investment and employment growth path and is bringing demand for infrastructure such as building and construction of houses, roads, schools and hospitals and shopping centres. It also brings demand for retail and financial products, medical and health services, libraries and training. The Northern Rivers is expected to be the fastest growing region in NSW over the next decade, with population forecast to grow at 2.1% p.a. Coastal localities: Tweed, Byron and Ballina; have been growing at more than 4% p.a.”

However, Salt (2003) indicates that the population growth in the coastal areas of the Northern Rivers is usually at the expense of inland areas. He mentions the relationship in Queensland between growth in Yeppon and decline in Rockhampton, growth in Hervey Bay with corresponding decline in population at Maryborough. Salt (2003, p.148) goes on to say, “A similar relationship exists between inland Lismore in the Northern Rivers. …where the population dropped 0.1 percent as compared with increases of 2.0 per cent at Byron Bay and 1.1 per cent at Ballina down the coast.” What he doesn’t mention, are the small rural communities located west of
Lismore, cut off by the Great Dividing Range, that are in still greater decline.

A CLOSER LOOK AT THE GEOGRAPHIC AND DEMOGRAPHIC FEATURES OF THE REGION

The Northern Rivers region extends from the Clarence Valley, just north of Coffs Harbour to the Queensland Border in the north, covers 20,896 square kilometres. It includes a coastal strip east of the Great Dividing Range as well as the inland area west of the Ranges.

There are ten Local Government Areas (LGAs) in the region: Byron, Ballina, Copmanhurst, Grafton, Kyogle, Lismore, Maclean, Pristine Waters (the result of amalgamation between the shires of Nymboida and Ulmarra), Richmond Valley (the result of another amalgamation between Richmond River & Casino Councils) and Tweed.

The Tweed, Richmond and Clarence Rivers dissect the Northern Rivers across its length while national parks and world heritage areas, located here are part of the region’s strengths. Outside of Sydney, the Northern Rivers region is the number one tourist destination for visitors to NSW according to the Invest Northern Rivers Website.

A report prepared by the Northern Rivers Regional Economic Development Organisation, states (1996 p. 11) “Historically, the economic development of the Northern Rivers has been based on significant primary industries, both extractive and agricultural. The region’s rainfall, temperature and sunshine, soils, history and skills have combined to enable it to grow a multitude of sub-tropical and temperate climate produce, its natural beauty, including its wilderness areas, beaches and rivers in close proximity and its temperate climate and lifestyle attracting rapid growth, are conducive to tourism and a range of multimedia activities that show off the region’s rich resources and assets”. The majority of residents of the Northern Rivers live on, or near, the coast, with the more sparsely populated settlements located west of the Ranges.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

From February 2001, the author of this paper was contracted to the CTC@NSW program as its Northern Rivers Coordinator. She would like to thank the CTC@NSW Program manager, Ms Susan Locke, and Associate Professor Allan Ellis, for reading and commenting on the drafts of this paper.

From February 2001 through 20 November 2002, the Author worked with many small communities, on both sides of the Ranges. From the numerous surveys (over 3000), focus groups and meetings she conducted, she discovered that most of these communities were facing the same issues that confronted other small, regional and rural inland communities in Australia, e.g. declining populations with all the economic consequences that that entails as well as the seemingly ever elusive equity of access to a full range of Information & Communications Technology (ICT) and other community services that are often taken for granted by urban Australians. All of these issues, as well as others, are well documented in the research and literature that is available. The recently published book, Land of Discontent, (2000 UNSW Press), edited by Pritchard and McManus provides a great deal of insight in understanding the dynamics of change in rural and regional Australia.

However, the author believes that the Northern Rivers region of NSW can be seen as a microcosm of the disparity in economic growth and prosperity within Australia. This is reflected both in terms of its relative prosperity in its more densely populated coastal areas as well as by the declining economic viability of many of its communities located west of the Ranges. Over the past decade various state and federal government policies and programs have focused on the economic consequences of the inequitable distribution of services that are delivered to regional Australia with varying degrees of success. This situation is well articulated by Beer, Maude and Pritchard (2003, p.4 -5) “Change within the economy and change within political processes has meant that, for most Australians, where you live – your region – has become a much more important determinant of quality of life that it was thirty, twenty or even ten years ago.”

However, before going further, we need to consider some of the policy implications that governments must deal with in terms of rural
and regional economic development. In a research report released by the Bureau of Industry Economics (1994, pages xiii - xiv) it states,

“While assessments of where governments fit into the process of regional development differ, there is broad agreement that at the minimum it is vital for governments to get the fundamentals right. This includes management of the public sector, efficient systems of business taxation, the provision of efficient physical infrastructure, the provision of good education and training systems, the operation of effective finance and labour markets, the development of an effective regulatory and competition framework, and stability and predictability in policy setting.... Against the backdrop of the increasing integration of the world economy and greater competition in global markets there are four key issues in developing effective regional development policies for the future, namely:

• Getting the fundamentals for growth right;
• Helping the regions to realize their potential;
• The role of selective incentives in attracting particular activities; and
• Dealing with inequalities in outcomes.

While Australian governments have achieved worthwhile reforms over the last decade, some areas of the general business environment remain uncompetitive, thereby handicapping regional and national development. In an increasingly integrated world economy, the removal of these handicaps is crucial to promoting regional development.”

Perhaps policy guidelines such as this influenced the thinking of NSW’s Labour Government when it initiated its Community Technology Centre at New South Wales (CTC@NSW) program in 2000. ‘Social enterprise’ or ‘social entrepreneurship’ are the obvious paradigms for this program as its major focus is on helping people in small regional communities develop and use marketplace based ventures to achieve their agreed social agenda.

OVERVIEW OF CTC@NSW PROGRAM

CTCs evolved from the earlier Telecentres that had been funded during the 1990s by the federal government. Prior to the establishment of the CTC@NSW program, there were 33 Telecentres in regional NSW all of which have now been incorporated into the CTC@NSW Network. The CTC at Clunes, in the Northern Rivers, joined the CTC Network via this channel.

The CTC@NSW program has, since the inception of its operational phase in March 2001, focused on assisting regional NSW communities, of less than 3000, gain access to a range of technology services for local businesses, students, community organisations, individuals and identified special groups within these communities. As of June 2003, there were 83 fully funded CTCs serving over 100 communities located throughout NSW with a further five CTCs in the planning stage. The CTC@NSW program has evolved into a substantial network of community owned and operated businesses located in small regional communities linked by both aspiration as well as technology. These communities are now poised to overcome some of the economic inequities that their geography has dealt them, provided they can maintain their momentum once the present program’s funding runs out in June 2004.

Although the momentum for establishing a CTC comes from the communities themselves, it does involve a rather lengthy application process. The first step in the process was to complete and submit an Expression of Interest (EOI) to determine eligibility. Once the EOI had been approved by the program’s Support Unit, the Regional Coordinator would then notify the ‘approved’ community so that they could commence work on the comprehensive application cum business plan. In most cases, both the EOI, and the application, were facilitated and completed through a consultative process initiated by the Regional CTC Coordinator.

A CTC@NSW application is for seed funding rather than an out-right grant and each individual community would determine how much they would apply for, up to a specified value, usually between $150,000 and $200,000 after they had completed the business planning process. Successful applications are funded over a three-year period based on their business plan. There in lies the major differentiator between the CTC@NSW model and funding for the earlier Telecentres programs. The goal for each CTC applicant community was to create a commercially viable stand-alone, community-owned and operated business that uses information technology facilities and services to provide local solutions for local communities. The old
Telecentre programs did not have the same commercial imperative but tended to focus more on equity issues.

CTC Seed Funding provided for such things as:

- Computers, software and peripherals;
- Office equipment such as photocopiers, colour and black and white printers, scanners and multimedia equipment such as digital cameras OR similar, e.g. whatever was decided was required to provide the services needed in their community;
- Networking equipment, e.g. routers, etc.;
- Phone and often fax machines;
- Office Furniture including desks, chairs, filing cabinets, tables, etc.;
- Administrative Costs: insurance, accounting fees, consumables, signage, etc.;
- Salary and oncosts for the CTC’s manager.

Funding did not cover the purchase or rent of the building/facility in which the CTC was to be located. That was considered to be an essential part of the community’s contribution. Co-location with libraries, Council or community owned buildings that were centrally located in high traffic areas within the community were usually pre-requisite to a successful application. This aspect of the program often caused considerable angst to the committees as they worked on the application. (More information on the CTC@NSW program is available from their Website, http://www.ctc.nsw.gov.au)

The role of a CTC @ NSW Regional Coordinator was to:

- Create regional awareness and generate interest in the CTC@NSW program;
- Organize community meetings to discuss the program;
- Liaise with the program’s Support Unit on a regular basis;
- Facilitate the establishment of local steering committees or groups to promote the CTC program within communities;
- Assist communities in preparing their EOI;
- And, once the EOI was successful, help the communities with their application and business plan;
- Manage expectation.

The CTC@NSW Support Unit provides ongoing assistance for applicant and funded communities, including: Business Planning, I.T. & Telecommunication support, Marketing and Public Relations support, Community Support and Management and Business Development initiatives to support CTCs in identifying and delivering a range of potential revenue streams which would serve to support CTC’s in their self-funding initiatives. It is important to note that the Support Unit not only provides assistance to communities during the application process but also continues after seed funding has been expended or currently, until June 30 2004, when the entire CTC@NSW program must either have additional funds in place from governments or cease operation.

It is also important to understand that CTCs come in various configurations and can be:

- Stand alone Centres; single town/single managing community organization such as Clunes;
- Out reach models such as Kyogle’s with a Main centre with outreaches to smaller neighbouring villages;
- Alliance CTCs such as Evans Head and Woodburn, with each providing a subset of the services and equipment that can be offered by a stand alone CTC. These sites can also be co-located in a number of public facilities, e.g. Tourist Information Centre, etc.:
- Outreach sites – usually have just one or two computers and Internet access and are serviced by the main site.

Finally the eligibility requirements for towns wishing to participate in the CTC program are as follows:

- Communities with populations of 3,000 or less irrespective of size of the LGA
However, Towns of 3,000 or more may be considered on a case-by-case basis where special need is evidenced. They can be:

- Larger towns in LGAs of less than 10,000;
- Larger towns in LGAs where the LGA is represented by one town with small villages and hamlets the major feature of the surrounding area;
- Special needs towns.

While only the communities of Kyogle, Bonalbo and their respective outreaches and Evans Head with its alliance partner Woodburn, have been included in this Case Study, it is important to note that funding for other CTCs in the Northern Rivers has been approved for the communities of Uki, with outreaches in Chillingham and Tyalgum, Pottsville with outreaches in Mooball and Burringbar, Mullumbimby, with outreaches in Brunswick Heads and Bangalow and Nimbin, with outreaches in Cawongla, Wadeville and Mt Burrell.

The other important variable in the application process for CTCs was the composition of the local organizing committee and the role it played in the success of a community’s application. Each of the Northern Rivers’ CTC community committees had its own special composition, and in some instances this even hindered the progress of applications. In the case of Kyogle, we had to have two go’s at getting the right mix of people on the committee in order to get the application ‘up’!

It soon became evident to the author that successful applications were the result of the work of ‘good committees’. Successful committees included champions from each of the identified target markets, e.g. seniors, students, etc. as well as someone with strong business skills preferably an accountant or bookkeeper and people who were well networked in their communities. Beer, Maude and Pritchard (2003, p. 143) also say, “Economic development ‘on the ground’ is affected by the resources available, the political pressures on the organization, the competition from other organizations and the level of support received from the community. The skill and abilities of practitioners working on the ground are pivotal, as is the nature of local industry.”

Finally, it is important to look at some of the questions from the applications and how the different communities responded to these questions. The author often found herself in the position of having to translate and explain what some of these questions actually meant and what sort of answers were actually required. This is not to say that the people on these committees were illiterate, but rather that they had to grapple with a language usage that they weren’t familiar with. While the language in government documents may role off the tongues of bureaucrats and is clearly understood by the people who deal with policy and its implementation, it often seems to be a foreign language to the people who are actually trying to access the various programs and who are struggling to complete the applications.

Finally, let’s have a look at how the committees in three communities responded to the question, “What vision do you have for how the CTC will match the needs of groups and people in your communities?”

**CTC @ KYOGLE**

Over the past decade Kyogle has lost many of its services and training facilities to either the coastal regions or Lismore and many of its young people leave town as soon as they finish school. Inter-generational contact is very limited in Kyogle and one of its most important resources, its youth, is being lost to the community as young people move away to find employment and greater opportunity.

Between the Census periods of 1996 and 2001, Kyogle experienced a 5.6% decline in population while the two largest cohorts in 2001, where those between the ages of 0 – 14 years and 45 – 64 years with a median age of 39 years (up from 35 years in the previous census period). 86.7% of its population is in the labour force. 4.9% of Kyogle’s population identified themselves as being Indigenous, which represents a slight increase from the previous census period.

A representative group from the community formed a committee to apply for CTC @ NSW funding and following the approval of their EOI the long and sometimes frustrating application process began. One of the first things we had to do was determine the needs of the community. So a number of community
consultation meetings were arranged and held around the town and various groups within the community were surveyed. The meetings and surveys all indicated that residents of Kyogle and the surrounding district, wanted access to a wide range of training programs, such as those offered by ACE. Poor roads, low car ownership and lack of public transportation and IT facilities were listed as major obstacles.

The Committee also wanted to facilitate the development of a strong and vibrant local music industry in the region as Kyogle has many talented musicians living in the community as well as many aspiring young people who want to have a career within this industry. Their vision was to establish a CTC@Kyogle, in partnership with ACE North Coast, in order to provide the training facilities, which could support the ongoing economic and social development of Kyogle and surrounding villages community as well as provide access to music and public media production facilities. The consistent vision with Kyogle’s outreach villages of Wiangaree, Grevellia, Grady’s Creek and Woodenbong, was to simply have access to a state of the art computers and an affordable Internet service.

One of the criteria for funding, and a major hurdle for most of the communities in the Northern Rivers, was that they had to provide the building to house their CTC as purchase price or rental was not included in the seed funding. Kyogle was no exception; in fact they had to apply twice when their first application came unstuck at the eleventh hour because they had not been able to arrange a suitable building. However, they were able to partner with the North Coast Adult and Community Education (ACE) program the second time around and arrange a co-location with ACE paying the rent.

Although it took two attempts, the CTC @ Kyogle finally opened for business in July 2003. It’s too early to tell yet as to whether or not they will be able to achieve the goals they set for themselves in their business plan. But they will be monitored and supported by the CTC Support Unit, at least until June 2004.

CTC @ BONALBO

The villages of Bonalbo, Tabulam, Mallanganee and Ewingar are also located west of the Ranges. While the first three are located within Kyogle Shire, Ewingar is located in Copmanhurst Shire. All are over 50k from the town of Kyogle and the state of the roads makes the trip seem even longer. ABS statistics for these communities indicate some significant variables but the overall picture, is one of decline. In the 1996 Census, the entire District of Ewingar had less than 200 residents. Bonalbo, had a population of 379 and experienced a 9.7% decrease, Tabulam’s population of 357 remained stable but Mallanganee, with a population of 110, experienced a 14.7% decline. Such a decline, off such a low base, made the aspirations for a CTC and outreaches in these communities all the more heart-felt. The organising committee had long recognised that if their communities were to have any future, they had to find a means to:

- Support the career and training aspirations of the people in their communities, whatever their ages may be;
- Improve the employment opportunities and self-esteem of the people who live in the area;
- Assist its young people and to try and prevent the ‘brain drain’ that sees so many young people leave because of lack of facilities;
- Gain access to a range of government and other services that are readily available to people who live in urban areas.

Surveys were widely distributed in these communities with Bonalbo achieving an exceptionally high response rate of 66%. A sampling of some of the unprompted comments on these surveys regarding the establishment of a CTC in Bonalbo follows:

- “Enhancement to creating home based business in the Upper Clarence;”
- “ Will help people like me to update their skills;”
- “ I’d like to do computer courses;”
- “It’s really needed as its too far to travel to TAFE.” another said,” I want to take TAFE courses next year but it’s too far to travel.” And, in that same vein, “I’d like to do external studies at Uni;”
Several said, “As senior citizens we need it;”

Many said, “We really need a facility like this in Bonalbo;”

Others said, “It’s very badly needed in this area;”

“Got to keep up with the kids;”

A teacher commented, “I think it is essential to have community access to computer facilities, especially in an area where not many people have a computer at home;”

Another suggested that,” Should offer better classes than Certificate 2 in IT.”

Over 25 responders commented that a CTC in Bonalbo was a Great or Good idea and long over-due in the area.

CTC @ RICHMOND RIVER - THE EVANS HEAD & WOODBURN ALLIANCE

The communities of Woodburn, Evans Head, were once part of the now amalgamated Richmond River Shire. They shared a common vision for the establishment of a CTC and believed that:

• A CTC would help preserve the culture, history and values of the participating communities and play a major role in the delivery of services, education and training that would enhance the skill base of targeted groups in the participating communities;

• Additionally, they felt that a CTC would enable both communities to gain better access to a greater range of tourism related skills, products and services which would allow them to even out the peaks and troughs that are the predominant feature of tourism in this area;

• They also felt that a CTC would facilitate the development of the necessary skills needed by these communities in order to gain access to more profitable, niche tourism markets. In particular, the Evans Head community plans to work closely with the Evans River K-12 School and Southern Cross University to provide education and experiential opportunities as well as internships in their marine engineering and other programs.

A CTC Alliance in this area will serve as a focal point for additional opportunities for economic and social development as well as mitigate any fragmentation or overlaps of services. In particular the CTC at Evans Head could provide leadership through the use of technology in order drive the development of programs that will help to preserve the area’s rich history whilst at the same time developing its skill base. Finally, a CTC would provide a cohesive focal point to ensure the long-term viability of these communities.

The target markets in the alliance communities were:

• The elderly and those with disabilities;
• The Koori groups in both locations;
• The Fishing Industry;
• Youth Groups;
• Tourism Businesses in both communities;
• Local sporting organizations;
• Training providers such as ACE and The North Coast Institute of TAFE who were unable to find suitable venues in the Evans Head /Woodburn area to run daytime courses.

Surveys in these communities indicated a need for:

• Access to information from a number of Government departments and organizations such as Veterans Affairs, Health, and Education, Coordinated tourism opportunities and information and services;

• A range of services targeting Small & Medium sized Enterprises (SMEs) from secretarial support through to building skills and recreational facilities that utilise technology were also envisaged;

• The establishment of a CTC Video Conferencing facility at Evans Head could further assist in the delivery of a coordinated approach to disaster management, particularly in times of flood and bushfire events.
As you see, the same themes and needs emerged in all three communities but were just articulated in slightly different ways. The other communities in the Northern Rivers who applied for seed funding also expressed many of the same needs and had similar aspirations.

CONCLUSION

Small rural and regional communities in NSW are prepared to work long and hard to keep up with their urban counterparts. However, they are not prepared to be ‘written off’ by economic rationalist policies and marginalised as Australians, all they really want is a fair go. Beer, et al state (2003, p.8), “The prospect of more substantial regional development policies in Australia appears slim. Australia has miserly governments when compared with other developed economies.” However, Gray & Lawrence (2001, p. 187-188) espouse the more optimistic belief that, “At State and Federal levels there remain some remnants of an egalitarian ethos in policy-making. Policies based on principles of social justice seek to ensure that Australians have equity of access no matter what State they reside in, and no matter what their background. Thus, for example, social security is available to all those deemed to be in need; geographical location is considered irrelevant… Telecommunications is another area where the parameters have been established nationally and there are means for ‘fiscal equalisation’, or spatially distributing taxation revenue among governments according, at least partly, to need.”

In conclusion, it seems that the driving force for regional development needs to come from the grass roots, community level. Unfortunately, communities ‘don’t know what they don’t know’. This is supported by Gray and Lawrence (2001, p. 189-190)

“Dore and Woodhill (1999) found rural and regional people not to have well-developed skills in conceptualizing the future, utilising new communications technologies, managing productive links with corporate bodies, or designing new strategies for community growth. This is what so-called ‘community capacity building’ activities seek to redress, but they risk the short-sightedness of neoliberal individualism while retaining the practical attractiveness of people based rather than collective community strategies. While such an argument might be used further to justify retreat by the state, it might also be seen as a call for government to be strategic in its investment in communities so that local or regional autonomy might develop.”

Although the rollout of the CTC @ NSW program has been successful, its long-term success and the viability of all the small businesses that have been created will ultimately be determined on a community-by-community basis.

REFERENCES


CTC Website: http://ctc.nsw.gov.au


Northern Rivers Regional Economic Development Organisation. Regional Interim Strategies: A Report of the Interim Strategies Produced by the Regions Established under the Commonwealth Regional Development Program, September 1996, Canberra, Northern Rivers Enterprise: The Sustainable Community

