Outside - Looking In: evaluating a community capacity building project

by Peter O’Meara, Janice Chesters & Gil-Soo Han

Abstract
The Alberton Project was a three-year community capacity building project that ran from 1999 until 2002. It aimed to revitalise the local community surrounding the small Victorian town of Yarram. Evaluation of the project involved participant observation, monitoring of media reports, surveys and interviews. Outcomes are reported with reference to four capacity building domains of vision and leadership, structure and partnerships, community engagement, and resources. The Project demonstrated a high level of administrative competence and an ability to build a strong profile. While members showed themselves to be well motivated and ethical, they battled to engage a wide range of community members. Limitations were identified with the project’s bureaucratic structure compared to alternate social models of organisation that reflect how people interact in a community. Other rural community capacity building projects should consider the value of open organisational structures that invite a more diverse membership from the community.

Introduction
The Alberton Project was a community capacity building project that operated in the south-east corner of rural Australia from late 1999 until its transfer to a successor organisation – Alberton Project Incorporated - at the end of 2002. It was based on other community capacity building models operating in the United States of America and Australia (Allen 1998, 1999; Kretzman & Green 1998; Kretzman & McKnight 1993). A consortium of five partners facilitated the project, these were: Wellington Shire Council; Victorian Farmers’ Federation; Department of Human Services; the then Department of Natural Resources and Environment; and Yarram and District Health Service. The Yarram district is located 220 kilometres southeast of Melbourne, 65 kilometres south of Sale (Map 1). In 1996 the area had a decreasing and ageing catchment population of 5,800 that was projected to fall to 4,900 by 2020. Main industries in the area include farming and timber production, a correctional institution, fishing activities along the coastal areas and tourism associated with the Tarra-Bulga National Park.
The name of the project was derived from the former Alberton Shire that, along with four other municipalities, was amalgamated into Wellington Shire in 1995. The loss of the Alberton Shire and the rationalisation of other government departments in the area were perceived by local leaders as having an adverse impact on local infrastructure, employment, and on the local economy in general. The latest example of government rationalisation is the planned closure of the local minimum-security prison at nearby Won Wron. The main aim of the project was to revitalise the local community surrounding Yarram. Specific objectives of the Alberton Project included restoring population stability to the area; increasing job opportunities for residents; increasing lifestyle options for the community, and increasing investment and real estate values in the area. The broad strategies adopted to achieve these aims were:

- building the capacity of local people;
- empowering local people to lead;
- building local and regional partnerships and networks;
- working together to improve social, cultural and physical aspects of the community; and
- lifting the economic self-sufficiency of the district.

Monash University School of Rural Health was contracted to evaluate the project on behalf of the Victorian Department of Human Services. The evaluation goal was to enhance the outcomes and maximise the benefits of the community revitalisation project through identifying interventions and models of good practice that help fulfil its aims. These activities were designed to support the ongoing growth and development of the project, and help ensure that future programs can benefit from the knowledge and experience gained. The development of a monitoring and evaluation framework for the Alberton Project is a positive contribution toward the identification of strategies that are crucial to the success of this community revitalisation project and those that may follow in other places.

The evaluation used a capacity building framework to assess:

1. The strength of the Alberton Project coalition;
2. Whether the Alberton Project was likely to be sustained;
3. The learning environment of the Alberton Project; and
4. Community capacity to address community issues.

Our evaluation looked at the development of the project’s infrastructure and the sustainability dimension of capacity building. We unpackaged the term sustainability into the three key elements of environment, economy and society. A useful definition of social sustainability that incorporates these elements has been adopted by Cocklin et al. 2001.

Social sustainability refers to a society’s ability to maintain, on the one hand, the necessary means of wealth-creation to reproduce itself and, on the other, a shared sense of social purpose.
to foster social integration and cohesion. Partly this is a question of having a sustainable economy ... Partly it is a question of culture and values ... [and the] sense of identity and social purpose ... (Ekins and Newby 1998, p. 5, quoted in Cocklin et al. 2001, p. 8)

Community capacity building ventures such as the Alberton Project can be described in terms of three overlapping and interrelated dimensions of infrastructure building, enhancement of sustainability, and the fostering of problem-solving capabilities. The latter dimension is particularly crucial, as there is little value in building a system that cements in today's problems when it is future problems that will challenge communities (Hawe et al. 2000).

In the future, the Alberton Project Incorporated will be judged on its ability to foster the problem solving capabilities of the community through its use of the physical resources of the area, its human skills and its social institutions. At this juncture it would be premature to make strong judgements about the community’s ability to address largely unknown problem situations. This is a long-term objective that extends well past the timeline of the Alberton Project and our formal evaluation efforts. In reality, only the community can judge its capacity to adequately solve future problems. As outside observers we can at best only highlight indicators of likely success and make suggestions that may increase the odds of positive outcomes.

Monitoring and Evaluation Approach

Following approval through the Monash University Human Ethics Committee, the evaluation was undertaken using multiple evaluation methods over three years of the project. In the first year of the evaluation we concentrated on participant observation of the Alberton Project, monitoring media reports, plotting the project’s boundaries, and developing an evaluation framework. A community survey and semi-structured interviews with four key informants were added for the second phase of the evaluation. The use of these multiple research methods recognised that the character of a community “... is far too complex to be adequately captured by the use of only one variable or measure and/or by one method of gathering data” (Luloff 1999, p. 314).

During the first year we examined the project planning and development structures, and processes that contributed toward the building of community capacity. This involved the research team members examining relevant documents, preliminary monitoring of the local media and attending activities associated with the Alberton Project as observers. These activities helped develop an understanding of the project and provided the opportunity to assist when appropriate in the development of achievable and measurable project objectives. The face-to-face interaction with the project participants was a vital component of the research, as it helped build up an understanding of community relationships and dynamics that are not always apparent from documents or even survey data (Luloff 1999, p. 325).

The major analytical activity during the first year was to clarify the project design including program logic, goals and objectives, performance information requirements, key performance measures, data sources and collection methods, and communication strategies. The first year of the evaluation generated the basis for the development of an overall monitoring framework that could perhaps assist the local community and funding agencies make judgments about the continuing relevance of the project’s goals and strategies.

The evaluation model, adopted for
the continuing monitoring process, was adapted from the NSW Health Promoting Hospitals Project (Hawe et al. 2000; Health Promotions Strategy Unit 2000). It is illustrated in Figure 1 in the form of a matrix that links three dimensions of capacity building and five domains of the capacity building framework. The use of this matrix enabled the mapping of strategies and the monitoring of outcomes. The three capacity building dimensions are the distinctive feature of our approach; they allowed the measurement of progress in the achievement of project objectives. The development of infrastructure or service development is the capacity to deliver responses to problems through the establishment of minimum requirements in structures, organisations, skills and resources in the community. Enhanced sustainability is the capacity to continue to deliver the program activities through a network of agencies, in addition to, or instead of, the project partners that initiated the program. This was the focus of the second phase of the evaluation. Finally, the problem solving capability of organisations and communities is the capacity of a more generic kind to identify issues and develop appropriate mechanisms to address them, either by building on the experience with a particular program or as an activity in its own right.

In the second evaluation phase, we modified the capacity building domains to four components of vision and leadership, structure and partnerships, community engagement, and resources. The use of this monitoring and evaluation framework has the advantage of drawing on a well-developed approach, which has an easy-to-follow process that can be used over longer time periods than many other evaluation techniques. Community leaders and members are able to see how they are progressing over time, avoiding the need for ‘outsiders’ to make judgments on the performance of a community. The community itself can take charge of the process of measuring success.

### Activities and Achievements

We used these four modified domains of community capacity building as the reporting framework to map the activities and achievements of the Alberton Project (Hawe et al. 2000). These are analysed using the three dimensions of capacity building to ascertain the project’s progress toward its aims. Before reporting on this we present the results of the community survey that examined the predisposing, enabling and reinforcing factors influencing community capacity, and the results of

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**Figure 1  Capacity Building Matrix**

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<th>Domains</th>
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<td>1. Develop Infrastructure</td>
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monitoring the local media to identify issues that were reported in relation to the Alberton Project. The factors considered were:

- predisposing factors, such as community awareness and commitment, and an ability to work together in a cohesive manner;

- enabling factors, that encourage broad participation in community affairs, provide opportunities for the exchange of views and information, and the ability to resolve differences; and

- reinforcing factors, including representative decision-making mechanisms and strong links to external networks and resources that support local issues. (Hawe et al. 2000, pp. 15-18)

Of the 250 surveys sent to residences in the Yarram area, 19 were returned to sender, with only 24 people filling in the survey and returning it to us. Bearing in mind this disappointing response rate and resultant small sample size, Figure 2 provides an indication that the respondents had a strong underlying belief in the local sense of community and their ability to work together. That is, its predisposing factors are very strong with over 90 percent of respondents agreeing or partly agreeing with the positive statements made. However, their confidence waived when they considered the enabling and reinforcing factors, with over ten percent not agreeing with the statements and almost 20 percent being unsure. The enabling factors of concern were:

- a perceived lack of interagency and public meetings;

- the uncertainty that agencies, residents and groups would accept decisions in the event of conflict; and

- concern about the existence of networks across individuals, groups and organisations.

Insofar as reinforcing factors were concerned the responses exhibited some ambiguity. A quarter of respondents disagreed that the decision making in the community was representative. Another 20 percent had no opinion on the issue.

In the three years surveyed, a total of 182 relevant articles appeared in the local newspaper, The Yarram Standard.

**Figure 2: Community Capacity to Address Community Issues**
In some cases particular stories relating to the proposed closure of the local prison and concerns about the supply of groundwater were picked up and appeared in the metropolitan press or on the local ABC radio station in Gippsland.

**Capacity Building Components**

The findings of the evaluation are reported within the four modified capacity building components of vision and leadership, structure and partnerships, community engagement, and resources.

**Vision and Leadership**

From the onset, the leadership group of the Alberton Project was drawn from established members of the community. While this was one of the early strengths of the project, its membership was largely static and lacked any great diversity, with the majority of members being employed middle-aged men. As a result their leadership style was traditionally hierarchical and in the view of some respondents, lacked any special creativity.

_I think it went zooming down the path of those specific issues that people got very excited about at the beginning. It didn’t really look at building the shape of the project ... and the longer term vision. That was one of the big problems with it._ (Interviewee)

As a result, these activists successfully put their concerns on the project’s agenda, with the result that resources were diverted from perhaps longer-term objectives that may have contributed more to community capacity building as a whole. In terms of leadership style, the Alberton Project could be termed consultative, with local residents involved in the project’s goal setting within their areas of expertise or responsibility (Cocklin et al 2001). A successful example of this was the performance of the Agribusiness panel that set about developing a strategic plan for the agricultural sector in the district. However, the project stopped short of engaging in wider participation...
when it came to important decisions about the project’s future, and about the organisational and cultural changes that were needed to transform the Alberton Project into a new entity capable of addressing the challenge of achieving social sustainability.

In common with many rural areas of Australia, Yarram and district suffers from the loss of its young people who leave the district to pursue education and employment opportunities in the city and large provincial centres. Cocklin et al. (2001) have reported on the socio-demographic trends that stand out in rural Victoria, most notably:

- modest population at best outside the regional centres;
- a pronounced ageing of the population in rural and regional areas;
- people in rural areas have less post-school qualifications than other Victorians;
- farm incomes are modest; and
- employment in agricultural sector is in steady decline.

The pool of ‘local’ leadership is therefore much less than it perhaps would have been in years past when a majority of young people remained in the area. Redressing this demographic disadvantage is a challenge for community capacity building programs throughout rural Australia. A way forward is the attraction of new residents of all ages to the area, who can then be encouraged to engage with the community. This requires an open-minded and tolerant attitude to ‘outsiders’, some of whom may not meet the traditional image of roles, norms and values.

The strength of this approach has been highlighted in the growth of large cities, where diversity of people and ideas are seen as important elements in the continued growth and vitality of these highly successful metropolises. The same pattern is observable in some of the more successful regional and rural centres that have made the ‘... link between policies designed to develop the economy of the region and those designed to challenge social exclusion’ (Rainnie 2002).

**Figure 4: Alberton Project Structure**
Structure and Partnerships

The Alberton Project had a four-tier structure, with a Partners Group at its apex and the other groups cascading from it as illustrated in Figure 4. A project manager was employed four days per week to coordinate and manage the project. Respondents criticised the project structure for its inflexibility and the dominance of the local health service amongst the partners. Criticism of the high profile and the influence of the health service was probably unavoidable given that it was the fundholder and made the major financial contribution to the project. The health service also made large personal and institutional contributions to the physical and intellectual conduct of the project. They provided meeting rooms, administrative support, and encouraged staff to become active participants in the activities of the project. To their credit, they recognised the danger of the Alberton Project being seen as their project and sought ways to make it clear that they were not running the project.

The then Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE) made substantial contributions of people and resources to the project. They supplied office space and secretarial support to the project manager free of charge, and like the health service they encouraged their local staff to play an active part in the project. For example, a valuable contribution from DNRE was their provision of facilitators at times throughout the project. The Victorian Farmers’ Federation and Wellington Shire both had a strong presence in the project through local participants, but contributed no direct financial support. On the other hand, the Department of Human Services provided funding for the project and its evaluation without making any obvious intellectual contribution to development of the project other than at the conceptual stages.

The project partnership may have been more effective if all members had committed to provide both active participation and some direct financial contribution. This may have led to the need for a more direct and transparent accountability through the development of an operational budget that was open to the scrutiny of all the financial contributors.

The structure of the Alberton Project was relatively rigid and not perceived as particularly welcoming to those situated outside the core membership. With the exception of the special purpose panels centred around special interests and activities at the bottom of the organisational hierarchy, few new people were admitted into the project throughout its life. The successful special purpose panels, which in theory remained under the control of the partners group, almost ran independently and were accountable to no one according to one interviewee. In contrast to the special purpose groups, the strategy group, which was designed to be the ‘engine room’ of the project, largely failed in its mission. The result was that the partners group became the major initiator and manager of ideas and activities, with the special purpose panels producing results on the ground. The original sub-groups of the strategy group appear to have become sidelined from an active role in the project. The declining numbers at meetings of the strategy group recognised that the original intent of the group was not being met. A poignant comment about the structure of the project came from one of the interviewees:

The multilevel structure was a problem. We kept sticking in new panels and new bits while we thought about a different way to do something without perhaps looking at the core aspects like the role of the strategy group and the partners group. (Interviewee)
The performance of the strategy group was of major concern to all those we interviewed. Our own observations of the group confirmed these misgivings. Despite its membership being relatively large (reputably 32 members at one time), it was not particularly representative of the community. The separation between the strategy group and the partners group was not particularly clear, and as the partners group became involved in the running of the project, the strategy group was left with little real purpose.

One of the problems that resulted from the partners group and the project manager running the project was that they shared a bureaucratic approach to management. This inadvertently distorted the shape and character of the project's operation. The leadership group lacked alternate points of view; someone to play devil's advocate and challenge the orthodoxy of the approach being taken. In retrospect we, as evaluators and 'outsiders', could have taken a more action-oriented approach and challenged the approach being taken during the course of our evaluation.

An enlightening comment about the bureaucratic environment of the project was that:

A lot of people aren't meeting attendees, they don't like that sort of format and the way the project was set up didn't appeal to them in any way so they didn't become part of it. So you have the same old meeting attendees who are in everything and come to every meeting. They are the only voices and perspectives that are coming through on the shape of the project. (Interviewee)

For the vision of the community to be realised in the future, the organisational structures and processes of Alberton Project Incorporated will need to be more open and transparent. For example, it should be possible for individuals and groups to enter the project at any point and not feel that they must be subservient to a dominant group that has control of the project resources. As a result of the failure of the strategy group, community members who were not already part of the project had few opportunities to enter the project at a policy and strategic planning level. This is the mould that the Alberton Project Incorporated needs to break if it is to have a sustainable future.

The initiation and development of positive partnerships with individuals and organisations outside the immediate area was one of the project's successes. For instance, the relationship between the Yarram district and Wellington Shire improved during the course of the project. A positive outcome of the Alberton Project has been an improvement in the public perception of Wellington Shire. The improvement in the tone and flavour of the local media reports bears this out.

The Shire is now much better regarded. That is a good thing because people were very negative about the Shire in the past and I think that this project has helped their image no end. It has helped the Shire to gain a better understanding of some of the issues in Yarram ... (Interviewee)

Despite the Shire participating as a 'partner', it appeared to have a degree of suspicion about the project. Despite this, its staff consistently attended meetings of the partners group and other activities where they provided technical advice and other intellectual input. A local Shire councillor also participated in the project as a local citizen and endeavoured to build positive linkages between the Shire and the Alberton Project. In the latter stages of the project, the Chief Executive Officer of the Shire and the Mayor took a more active interest in the project and showed signs of recognising that the idea may be
applicable in other parts of the Shire. The press articles collected between August 2000 and June 2003 demonstrate that the Alberton Project has had a positive impact on community perceptions of itself. The less negative press about Wellington Shire in the Yarram Standard was one example of a more positive public dialogue taking place than before the project was implemented.

People are looking at more positive things, there is definitely a different feel about the place and we [the Alberton Project] are only a contributing factor. I think there are many contributing factors to what makes a town good and I think we are one of the factors helping to do that. (Interviewee)

For the community to move forward, this ability to forge positive relationships needs to be further developed and nurtured through engagement with regional, state and national institutions. The project’s successful development of positive linkages with external agencies has formed the basis for the establishment of clusters of collaborating institutions from government, the private sector and non-profit organisations locally and in the Gippsland Region (Rainnie 2002). The Alberton Project initiated a successful process to establish Alberton Project Incorporated as an independent legal structure, which now provides the opportunity to apply for local and state government grants for specific community capacity building initiatives. The risk is that this new body will refreeze the existing power structures and close off admission to the project in the same way that the Alberton Project inadvertently did.

**Community Engagement**

The day-to-day management of the Alberton Project was the responsibility of the project manager under the formal supervision of the Chief Executive Officer of the Yarram and District Health Service. The manager’s professional background was in local government management, including a substantial period living and working in the former Alberton Shire. By his own assessment, he found it difficult to undertake both the strategic management role and the community-building role. The community development role needed ‘... someone locally focused, somebody who can walk up and down the street and talk to people’ (Interviewee).

An advertisement for a community facilitator was placed in the local media in response to the concerns of the project manager and others that his role was not fulfilling the community development role that was an essential part of the project. The position was not filled due to lack of funding. The project manager’s strengths were in effectively forging partnerships and strategic alliances both locally and across the broader region.

We’ve probably got stronger regional alliances than we have got locally, which sounds back-to-front, but I believe that is probably the case. And that is one of the challenges that have to be approached [by the successor body]. (Interviewee)

Like many rural towns, Yarram and district is dealing with the consequences of a steady decline in the number of young people remaining in the area, an ageing population, and the loss of professional and skilled staff previously employed in service industries such as in banking, state government departments and authorities, and local government. These categories of people and their families formed a large part of the active community through their support of sport and service clubs. It is a major challenge to replace these talented and committed individuals with a diminishing number of citizens who
often have business and employment commitments that make it difficult for them to fully participate in community affairs. The project’s progress toward developing the community capacity to fill these capability gaps was slow. Initially, the project seemed pre-occupied with a small number of important economic and environmental issues, and plans to run skill development programs were delayed. This resulted in the available time for these capacity building activities being pushed out until the very end of the project, thus limiting their impact. This reluctance to run skill development programs appears to have been the result of an uncertainty about the likely outcomes. The lack of a risk-taking culture worked to the detriment of the Alberton Project and by extension the community. The project may have failed to develop the community skill base necessary to take the community forward. Future programs need to tap into existing skills, knowledge and wisdom amongst the local population, and encourage the development of new skills that may carry individuals and the community as a whole forward into the future.

The lack of diversity amongst active members of the Alberton Project was a major weakness of the program. There was considerable concern about the lack of engagement with young people, the socially disadvantaged, ethnic groups and residents from outside the immediate Yarram area. With the atrophy of the strategy group, there appeared to be no effective mechanism to recruit people from marginal groups or the wider community into the decision-making processes of the project.

Structures and mechanisms to encourage the establishment of new interest groups were established. However, there is limited evidence that they were actively used outside the core group members, with project activities contracting to the core group.

The project leaders recognised this weakness and initiated strategies to include marginalised community members through the formation of new activity groups. In the final year the Alberton Project engaged a facilitator to run a successful community-learning program.

*There are a lot of people out there who are left out or not empowered to build their skills to the same level [as those involved]. It would be nice to have more than the standard ten people always popping up in everything. ... to have other voices actually having some comment about where we’re going.* (Interviewee)

The social capital group, or Community Lifestyle Group, did not function effectively for most of the project. Members of the group appeared to have difficulty coming to terms with the concept of social capital. This was disappointing, as it is probably the most important area of community capacity building in terms of enhancing sustainability and developing the future problem solving capacity of the community. Following efforts to initiate community development activities, the group went into recess in favour of special purpose panels pursuing the issues of public transport and the establishment of a community gymnasium.

*Over the two years of the program so far the level of community ownership has diminished probably at the same rate as the centralisation of responsibility has been drawn into that of the health service and the partners committee so that in reality what has happened is unwittingly the strategy group which was meant to be the actioning committee for the program has been sidelined to some extent.* (Interviewee)
We had the social capital group described to us as a 'sort of a mish-mash of leftover people with a vague interest' (Interviewee). It allegedly lacked any great sense of cohesion or sense of direction, while the leaders of the Alberton Project were unable to offer any strong guidance on how the group could operate effectively. In reality, it may have been better if the social capital group had undertaken the task of 'fleshing out' a social charter for the whole project that could have guided the activity-driven groups in their decision-making and policy implementation.

A much more successful activity that was indirectly linked to the Alberton Project was a Youth Enterprise Project which also had the health service as the fundholder. It had a very focused set of objectives, was funded separately and employed an experienced community facilitator to progress the project. Importantly, it benefited from the view that community capacity building projects need to encourage risk-taking.

One of the concerns about the Alberton Project was that the funding bodies, who were accountable for the monies, wanted to maintain control. While this is understandable, it runs counter to the principles embedded in community building initiatives that argue that a critical feature of community building is that it is a 'bottom up' process, one that is able to manage and respond to social, economic and environmental pressures (Cocklin et al. 2001).

One interviewee recognised this point, making the comment that, before we can build community capacity, we need to re-build community capacity in the government bureaucracy after years of government cutbacks and encouragement of market solutions to community issues.

A positive attribute of the Alberton Project was its willingness to report back to the community through the local press and through the conduct of public meetings. The feedback about the project through the Yarram Standard was excellent. The yearly public meetings had limited success, mainly due to the inability to attract a significant number of people from the community. Those who did attend were not particularly representative of the community, being an older homogeneous section of the community without any great diversity of background, interest or opinion. The meetings themselves were well organised and friendly events. However, there appeared to be only limited opportunities for new people to speak or become involved in the project.

**Resources**

The Alberton Project’s financial resources gained from state government departments and institutions were impressive. In addition, the resources in kind from Yarram and District Health Service (YDHS) and the Department of Natural Resources and Environment (DNRE) were important contributors to the Alberton Project. Unfortunately, the unincorporated nature of the Alberton Project made it very difficult to confirm the project’s financial accountability in an open and transparent manner. This characteristic limited the learning opportunities for similar community development programs.

While acknowledging the major contributions made, this relatively narrow level of resource support made the project potentially fragile and vulnerable to changes in the ability of the major partners to continue their support. We received a number of comments from community members...
to the effect that the narrow sphere of influence in the Alberton Project could potentially damage its longer-term sustainability. The project may have benefited from a larger number of committed stakeholders willing to participate as partners and share responsibility for the direction of the project.

It is our view that the timeframe for this and other similar community capacity building programs needs to be expressed in decades rather than years. Small rural communities need to have the constant support and encouragement of state and local government agencies to help them deal with adverse changes in their environment and take advantage of opportunities to improve the environmental, economic and social circumstances that may present themselves. This long-term approach requires commitments from all levels of government well beyond the electoral cycle. Communities need enough time to identify and establish sustainable processes that support the social, economic and environmental capabilities of the community.

Three years isn’t enough, it’s too short. ... we didn’t actually start doing a whole lot until a year had gone by effectively, and now it’s into the final year and we are only now starting to look at specific skill building and linking community groups together. (Interviewee)

The Alberton Project was particularly disadvantaged in this regard, as it was one of the first of the community building projects initiated in rural Victoria. The project had little previous experience or knowledge to draw upon during its early establishment.

One of the current leadership group’s best decisions was to hand the project over to a successor group (Alberton Project Incorporated) while the Alberton Project still had financial and human resources available to assist in the transition. A major challenge for the new body is to secure sufficient resources to operate effectively, without being excessively preoccupied with applying for competitive government grants. It would be far better if the state government provided core funding for this type of community capacity building program and provided communities with stability and greater confidence in the future.

The DRNE continued to provide office space and administrative support to the successor body. Funding for the provision of a paid coordinating position was not available, raising the risk that without the constant attention that a dedicated position provides the program may wither and ultimately die.

**Learnings For The Future**

Two of the significant features of the Alberton Project were its administrative strength and its prominent profile both locally and nationally. These characteristics addressed two of the three community capacity factors we believe are important for small rural communities.

The project was marketed as an example of best practice in community development and achieved a high profile throughout Australia and made strong linkages with external bodies. While the project operated in a very professional manner, it is clear in hindsight that its operation could have worked more effectively if it had consistently engaged with a wider spectrum of the community. This could have been achieved through a participative process that helped local networks to be formed across like-minded and dissimilar groups, and encouraged more risk taking.

The social and economic narrowness of the major participants in the projects resulted in a relatively small number of activities dominating the project’s agenda that were not necessarily
connected to an overall strategic plan for enhancing social capability. For example, the concentration on issues such as the supply of ground water to local farmers and the development of the local airport was of interest to specific sections of the community only. On the other hand, the Alberton Project came alive when the state government announced the planned closure of the local prison at Won Wron. This externally generated crisis stimulated the project participants into action and demonstrated the potential of the project to deliver a strong sense of community solidarity and sense of belonging. The absence of other strong interest groups for the duration of the project robbed it of vitality and innovative ideas that could have built community capacity through individual skills and leadership development activities through specific projects or educational programs. In retrospect, it may have been better if the project had encouraged small community groups to initiate programs that could be supported through the project in ways that would result in the building of social capital. Relatively modest funding may have been all that was required to encourage existing groups in the community to achieve great things. The requirement to ‘join’ the project discouraged potential participants who would have been interested in undertaking small projects or activities of interest to themselves. The existence of a hierarchical structure acted as a barrier to community members who felt that the project was constructed in the image of the established community leaders.

One of the interviewees summed up the situation after the first two years, saying that they had not managed to put the existing pieces together to the extent that the project was sustainable. The point was made that you can put a structure over the top that delivers short-term outcomes for the community and develop the community’s capacity to learn, but strong links and networks need to be in place if activities are to be sustained without substantial assistance from external funding bodies. In a sense the partners group recognised the shortcomings of the project and concentrated on devising strategies to make the project sustainable beyond the government-funded stage. They are to be applauded for this initiative. The new incorporated organisation will be able to undertake community capacity building activities, and attract additional funding from government and private sources. The biggest challenge for the future will be to determine the organic shape and character of Alberton Project Incorporated. Will it be a pale imitation of the Alberton Project, or will it be a more grassroots organisation that makes the Yarram area a great place to live? To achieve its aims, a wider cross-section of the whole community will have to have a role in developing the entity that evolves from the Alberton Project.

We can see the value of Alberton Project Incorporated either being established as or evolving toward a lattice-type structure in which power and resources are diffused across a wide range of individuals, interest groups and formal organisations. This type of structure is particularly resilient to environmental change, with no single part of the structure being vital to the survival of the whole. The other main advantage of this structure is its capacity to admit new members at any point in time and space; there is no sense of having to enter at the ‘bottom’ or being under the management control of a central group. It is an inclusive and participatory framework that integrates the organisation with the social, economic and environmental elements of the wider world. It recognises that community organisations and these three elements operate as a whole system, rather than as a network of separate parts that are seen as problems from the outside world.
that must be survived (Morgan 1980, p. 605).

Those activities that support the objective of social, economic and environmental sustainability of the Yarram and district community are likely to be the priorities of the relationships and networks that are established through the continuing community building process of Alberton Project Incorporated. We suggest that the main activities to pursue be targeted towards the four elements of social capability: norms and values; knowledge, education and training; skills in working together; and the development of the interactional infrastructure of the community (Cocklin et al. 2001, pp. 105-116). The ability of Alberton Project Incorporated to achieve its goals will depend on a number of key factors including:

1. Adequate resourcing to support activities and to allow enough time for it to become established;
2. Recognition of the existing social capability in the local community;
3. The ability to work within and across social and business sectors;
4. Adoption of a participatory and inclusive approach that breaks down social isolation and encourages the formation of new networks;
5. Recognition that the existence of conflicting interests is normal; and
6. An ability to negotiate and resolve conflict between divergent interests.

**Conclusion**

The Alberton Project was one of the first community capacity building projects in south-eastern Australia established to respond to the social, economic and environmental challenges facing small communities in rural Australia. Our evaluation of the project sought to assess its chance of likely success and to identify models of good practice that can be shared with communities in similar circumstances.

Four community capacity building domains were used to identify key issues and some potential strategies that may assist small rural communities in their quest to build sustainable futures. The Alberton Project was very successful in some of these and less so in others. Other communities considering participation in this type of capacity building project would benefit from establishing flexible and open organisational structures and processes that maximise the full potential of their local population and draw in regional partners. To maximise their chances of success, community capacity building projects need to encourage a responsible level of risk-taking, and have clear objectives that focus on the social, economic or environmental needs of the community. Establishment of an inclusive culture that is able to harness the knowledge, skills and interests of the whole community will maximise the chances of sustained success.

**References**


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