

Testing Ways to Engage Community Influentials in Rural Areas to Improve Race and Ethnic Relations Project

Organisations Involved & Contact Details

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Aims & Target Group

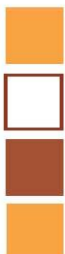
This project, now completed, aimed through its pilot project to:

- establish how:
 - attitudes to racial groups are formed in certain rural areas
 - these attitudes are permeated through local opinion makers or other influential people
 - to achieve change on a long term basis
- identify the nature of community relations, (inter)ethnic relations and race relations in selected rural communities
- identify the *informally* influential people in three selected rural communities in each of New South Wales, Victoria and Queensland, and identify their level of contact with members of ethnic and Indigenous communities
- identify the ways in which the "influentials" impact on local beliefs and attitudes, and how to change/support their attitudes to help them improve relations between diverse communities in these areas
- develop strategies for social change management in these communities, using *informal* local community structures
- provide follow-up support to guide and assist rural communities in subsequent change

Project Description & Components

Process

The project:





- conducted an extensive literature search on issues in rural/remote Australia, content analysis of local newspapers, statistical data on communities, community development, race, ethnicity and attitude formation
- selected nine rural communities on a range of criteria such as size, composition, regional economics and length of ethnic settlement, to reflect the diversity of rural and remote Australia
- chose from earlier pilot studies the following towns for detailed work:
 - Balranald, Griffith, Wagga Wagga (NSW)
 - Morwell, Kyabram, Colac (Victoria)
 - Gympie, Cairns, Maroochydore (Queensland)
- identified local issues and "influentials" through people they met informally on walks through the towns, coffee shops, tourist centres etc ("transect walks") and some 100 semi-formal interviews including:
 - **Professionals**
 - school teachers and principals
 - newspaper editors and owners
 - clergy
 - mayors, councillors
 - police
 - **Business people**
 - hairdressers,
 - business owners
 - farmers
 - tourist officers
 - real estate agents
 - **Community members**
 - ethnic and Indigenous leaders
 - newly arrived, 3rd and 4th generation migrants
 - elderly people
 - community, welfare and social workers
 - church members (cross-denominational)
 - service club representatives
- held initial discussions/workshops with the people identified both as formal or informal community "influentials" to help gauge their beliefs and attitudes, using principles of PRA (Participative Rural Appraisal)
- produced a substantial report on the project, which:
 - explores concepts of racism
 - examines the social dynamics of country towns
 - provides strategies for each area for strengthening harmony
 - provides an associated training kit as a basis for local forums to be held by rural community development officers and LGA staffs





Outcomes

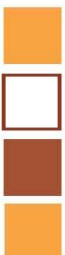
The project showed that:

- the attitudes expressed in the communities produced a wide variety of views held in rural and remote Australia, traditionally seen to hold conservative views over a range of issues
- community leaders were not always aware of, or able to act upon, local incidents of discrimination faced by ethnic and Indigenous communities
- where there was greater knowledge and dispelling of myths there is greater harmony
- some influentials clearly maintained their stated views while others made substantial modifications of attitudes
- while changes were largely qualitative and unquantifiable, some have the potential for wide spread influence in local communities

The pilot project concluded that:

- problems of non acceptance of ethnic communities relate to:
 - non-acceptance of difference, such as culture, norms and behaviour
 - perception of non-adaptation, eg "they do not speak English, they stick together"
 - threat to opportunities, eg "taking away jobs"
 - negative behaviour, eg "nuisance" actions, ethnic crime, gang activities
- problems of non-acceptance of Indigenous communities relate to:
 - supremacist attitudes the belief that Indigenous people are less civilised
 - stereotyping as lazy, alcoholic, not trustworthy, dirty
 - land rights threat to farmers' land through native title claims
 - a perceived drain on the public purse through welfare abuse and funding of Indigenous agencies
- "influentials" clearly need to be targeted as a key group in community education programs
- "influentials" are at the forefront of perpetuating positive and negative opinions about certain groups within their communities, and do not hesitate to communicate these views
- most important starting points are to tackle various attitudes which:
 - cause ethnic and Indigenous communities to be automatically regarded as "problematic"
 - result in the marginalisation of these groups through non-recognition, non-acceptance, non-interaction and non- participation in everyday social life of the town.

Authors of the final report are Bill Anscombe from the Centre for Rural Social Research, Hurriyet Babacan of the University of the Sunshine Coast, and Nora Fernandez of the Ecumenical Migration Centre. The kit is available from the Centre for Rural Social Research and is intended for leaders, opinion-makers, local authorities across rural communities. Adopting measures from the kit is a tool for improving community relations.





Challenges & Obstacles

Funding

Living in Harmony Community Grants 1999 New South Wales

\$60,000 awarded

Images

