

Bush and Bureaucrats: Women's Civic Participation from the Australian Outback

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Defining Civic Participation

Effective civic participation can be a catalyst for community development. Such participation comes about through identifying shared goals, developing cooperative networks and building trust. As a consequence, members of the created community are able to work towards the achievement of goals, both more effectively and on a larger scale than can individuals working alone. This article considers an online civic community called welink, in which trust, shared goals and cooperation form the basis for actions that contribute to a 'bottom-up' community development approach. In the case of welink, communication and cooperation between rural, academic, industry and public sector members of the community has enabled significant "... 'networks of civic engagement' within which reciprocity is learned and enforced, trust is generated, and communication and patterns of collective action are facilitated" (Foley and Edwards, 1996, p. 41).

Such civic participation enables the community to address issues, while also strengthening social capital. Trust, cooperation, and collective action are part and parcel of social capital, the "store of trust and goodwill ... [that] enhances our quality of life and provides the base for the development of financial and human capital" (Cox, 1995, p. 11). In developing active civic participation, communities are also acting to enhance levels of social capital. As Putnam has stated:

On the demand side, citizens in civic communities expect and get better government ... they are prepared to act collectively to achieve shared goals Most fundamental to the civic community is the social ability to collaborate for shared interests (quoted in Cox, 1995, p. 20).

Increasingly, it is being recognized that community development goals cannot be achieved by 'top-down' bureaucratic approaches in which outside experts 'solve' community problems. What is needed for rural communities are 'bottom-up' area-based approaches which recognize that rurality is characterized as much by diversity as by commonality, and that different strategies are necessarily required to meet the needs of particular communities.

Rural Women and Social Change

Rural communities worldwide have begun to feel the impact of major demographic, social, economic and institutional changes and women, in particular, have been affected by the social effects of economic downturn and the rationalization of services. Concern for their communities is something felt and expressed by rural women generally, not only those who are involved in primary production. This concern reflects women's traditional roles in the maintenance of the social fabric and the promotion of community (Moyal, 1989; Grace, Lundin and Daws, 1996).

Changes in gender roles in rural social contexts have significant positive implica-