



# Local innovation and learning communities

by Elaine Slater

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Although I have an adult education background, I have more recently been involved in community economic development with a small consultancy firm working out of Canberra. As part of this role I have attended the Australian Local Government Association (ALGA) Regional Co-operation and Development Forum for the past two years. It is promoted as a 'significant event on the national regional development agenda' that seeks to 'promote discussion and debate about the state of regional development, potential opportunities and ways forwards'. It is well attended by a range of local shire council, state and federal government agency representatives, and provides a significant opportunity to gain the ear of people who can make a difference at a very local level.

Each year 'National Economics' starts off the proceedings with a presentation of their annual 'State of the Regions' report. Dr Peter Brain, Director of National Economics, has spent many years working with the ALGA to produce a data base of information which gives an overview of the economic 'health of the nation'. This information can be broken down to provide very locally focused reports and is commendable, and enlightened work which provides a provocative alternative to the sometime questionable and often too generalised information produced by the government.

An international guest speaker is usually invited to provide a broader perspective. This year Professor Roy Green from the National University of Ireland gave an inspiring outline of the successes of the 'Celtic Tiger' in developing a striving, innovative and economically successful country, which not surprisingly placed high quality education at the core of its success.

The second part of the day provides some case studies of local government experience and best practice and I was very interested to note this year that the second half of the afternoon was to be devoted to 'Local Innovation and Learning Communities'. These two issues are close to my heart and to seeing them intrinsically linked in the title of this session showed real potential. Here, I hoped, was a starting point for discussion of the role of lifelong learning in the sustained development of vibrant and viable regional communities.

However, from my point of view the session was a disappointment. The two subjects were treated separately by different speakers, as if local innovation and learning communities were quite unrelated issues. Dr Brain reappeared for the session on learning communities, which surprised me as it is not an area he is known for. His presentation, whilst showing the value of his economic data to communities who wish to understand better their economic context, did not address itself to some fundamental questions.

Any amount of information can be produced with no effect if the communities to which it refers are unable to make critical, effective use of it. The presentation at the ALGA forum seems to be missing an essential element. How do we support communities in developing the analytical and development skills required to really use the information available to promote agendas which serve their needs. How do we empower people to effectively participate in the processes that determine the way in which their community grows and develops. Any one involved in adult education will have considered these issues at length and the recent explosion of interest in the development of Learning Towns and Cities would suggest that there is a growing understanding of their importance among local government decision makers. However, in the contexts of the ALGA Regional Development and Co-operation Forum these issues seem to lack an informed champion.

It is encouraging to see the ALGA embrace the idea of 'Learning Communities' by incorporating it into their forum agenda, but it would be sad to see another forum go by without some kind of presentation by adult educators who would clearly have a significant contribution to make to this discussion. ALA would be well placed to stimulate and resource this debate and it is worth considering whether ALA can establish a formal relationship with the ALGA. The ALGA Regional Co-operation and Development Forum provides a significant opportunity to impress upon a captive and receptive audience the central importance of creating a learning community in order to drive and manage effective, democratic and lasting regional development.