

# LOCAL BUT STRATEGIC

WRED & the provincial web of Rural Women's Business Networks

by **Samantha Albert**

**“G**“*“Grassroots” is one of the mantras of community economic development. Indeed, activities which are not based on the needs and desires of a community are destined to be irrelevant to that community. At the same time, there is a need for united action and advocacy on a larger geographic scale in order to address more strategic needs.*

For local CED organizations, the choice to focus on the grassroots nature of an issue is a relatively easy one. CED organizations which have a broad geographic scope, however, often struggle with the balance between working from the grassroots at a local level and maintaining unity, common purpose, and strategic action at a broader level.

Women and Rural Economic Development (WRED) is working at making sense of this struggle, as demonstrated in its relationship with 20 affiliated Rural Women's Business Networks around Ontario. I have been in the privileged position of exploring, documenting, and addressing this struggle through my Master's thesis at the University of Guelph and through continued work at WRED.

## ABOUT WRED

WRED is a federally incorporated, nonprofit CED organization dedicated to enhancing the sustainability of rural Ontario communities. It provides programs that enhance business development and diversification (including agriculture), life skills, networking, access to capital, and awareness of rural community economic development.

WRED's flagship programs include self-employment training, rural loan funds, and the Rural Women's Business Networks. While the training programs and loan fund are essential activities to support entrepreneurs, it is the work with the networks which has been the most far-reaching both geo-

graphically and in terms of numbers of women reached.

## WHY RURAL WOMEN'S BUSINESS NETWORKS?

Most CED professionals agree that local entrepreneurship is an important component of any economic development strategy leading to community health and resiliency.

Entrepreneurship is challenging for most people and women entrepreneurs experience accentuated challenges in their efforts to initiate and maintain their ventures. Women may face discriminatory attitudes in business dealings, may have difficulty in accessing credit to capitalize their businesses, and may lack access to formal and informal networks of businesspeople.

In the rural setting, women entrepreneurs may also face such challenges as isolation, fewer training and educational opportunities, and, in some cases, more conservative community attitudes towards female entrepreneurs.

WRED encourages the development of Rural Women's Business Networks in order to address some of these challenges. These networks are based on a simple, effective and financially self-sufficient networking model developed by Vi Wilson and Greta Kennedy in Durham, Ontario. WRED adopted this model and, with the help of Vi and Greta, works with local volunteer co-ordinators to nurture the development of new networks. As a result, hundreds of rural

businesswomen around Ontario are accessing networking dinners which provide the opportunity for support, information-sharing, networking, confidence-building, and promotion. They are also a darn good time.

Affiliated network co-ordinators plan two to four networking dinners a year, attended by anywhere between 25 and 100 people. While welcoming input from network participants, the co-ordinators do all the planning and decision-making. The dinners include a guest speaker, opportunities for promotion, and of course, plenty of networking time. Harried businesswomen can come to the dinners knowing that there will be no executives to join and no bake sales in which to participate, as is the case in many community activities. Instead, they can access a powerful networking opportunity without adding to their many responsibilities.

## WRED & THE NETWORK CO-ORDINATORS

At a formal level, all network co-ordinators sign an affiliation agreement with WRED which outlines the commitment for each party. While this written agreement is very clear, it is the subtleties of the relationship which provide a focus of interest. For my Master's thesis I explored the relationship between the volunteer co-ordinators of the Rural Women's Business Networks and WRED. I traveled around the province, eating my way through network dinners, in order to hear these amazing women speak about their perspective on their connection with WRED.

After interviewing network co-ordinators, I returned to the vacuum of my study to “write up” my thesis. What always plagued me, however, was how I was to take the conversation that I had begun back to the co-ordinators themselves in order to solicit ongoing feedback. When I graduated, fortunately, an internship sponsored by the Royal Bank enabled WRED to hire me to continue the work. WRED has always identified the networks as being important. By hiring me, they could pay greater attention to the networks and devote energy to the important relationship with the network co-ordinators. This relationship proved to be fascinating

because it gave rise to that perennial question: what is the balance between local autonomy and provincial (or regional) unity? After struggling with this question through my thesis, I was finally able to bring the conversation back to life through a meeting of network co-ordinators from around the province in October 1998.

Put 25 community leaders who specialize in networking in a room and you are bound to feel some energy. What I experienced on this day was a meeting of minds that was beyond my wildest hopes. The conversation that arose from that day helped to carry the discussion about balance beyond the walls of the WRED head office and back out into the community of co-ordinators.

#### NOT "ANSWERS," BUT QUESTIONS - & CONVERSATION

At this meeting, co-ordinators made very clear that it is important to them to retain their autonomy as local leaders in their community. They want to be free to respond to local needs and their own creative instincts. While autonomy is important to all, network co-ordinators vary in the degree to which they believe they should be autonomous. Some see themselves as local volunteers who happen to have an affiliation with WRED. Others see themselves as WRED volunteers, representing WRED in their local communities.

WRED believes that local autonomy is essential for network success in the broadest terms. The networks are a local activity and must be embedded in the local context. WRED cannot mandate the nature of a given network both because of the nature of the affiliation and because such control is inconsistent with our values. Additionally, WRED has always been concerned that the networks remain independent of the organizational ebbs and flows experienced by WRED.

At the same time, there is strength in all of the networks being part of something bigger and united in WRED. Affiliation with WRED can be beneficial for both the local co-ordinators as well as the larger WRED organization.

For the co-ordinators, affiliation provides

such things as opportunities to meet and be supported by other co-ordinators, credibility, and an important sense of being part of a larger movement. For WRED, affiliation provides an assurance that our mandate is being fulfilled. It provides an opportunity for us to have a presence in many communi-

---

*"What I have come to understand ... is that the 'solution' to the conundrum of this relationship lies not in the answers to these questions, but in the conversation itself."*

---

ties, and gives us access to the "voices" of rural businesswomen all over Ontario. There is great excitement in visioning the "big picture" of a united force of hundreds of women.

Where then does the notion of the "big picture" come into conflict with the notion of "local autonomy," and how are those conflicts resolved? I am no clearer to having a resolution for this conundrum, rather my conversation with the network co-ordinators simply left me with more questions:

- What are the implications for autonomy of the co-ordinators, given these networks remain under the WRED umbrella?
- What is the glue that keeps us all together? What is WRED's role in providing that glue?
- Are the networks a WRED "franchise"? Or are they independent groups that come together under an association called WRED?
- Is WRED the hub of the wheel which connects all of the co-ordinators? Or is WRED on the periphery, facilitating communication?
- How uniform should the networks be in their purpose, policy, procedures, and structure, for the sake of WRED's credibility and the credibility of each network?
- What are the implications of having a unified force of 20 networks, representing hundreds of women from around the province? How can that force be focussed and utilized to affect change in our communities?

What I have come to understand from the October meeting is that the "solution" to the conundrum of this relationship lies not in the answers to these questions, but in the conversation itself. The energy and thought that co-ordinators devoted to this discussion and the synergy of ideas that resulted from being together, stimulated us all to examine our roles in relation to each other and to examine how our beliefs and values translate into action.

There are no "right" answers to this struggle between local and larger scale. Each organization must come to its own conclusion. What is important, however, is to make the conversation explicit among the relevant players. This struggle is, in essence, about relationships, and relationships require a living, breathing process to properly serve their dynamic nature.

An on-going discussion keeps us from becoming complacent and making choices simply by default. This struggle which I have identified could be perceived as "merely theoretical" unless we constantly examine how it influences our actions. Of course, the conversation has no legitimacy unless it involves all of the relevant players in some fashion.

WRED has made a commitment to an on-going conversation process with the network co-ordinators which, in my mind, provides integrity to our work and demonstrates a commitment to a strong and dynamic organization. ☞

---

#### SAMANTHA ALBERT

is a recent graduate of the University of Guelph in the department of Rural Extension Studies. Her master's thesis is entitled "The Weaving of an Organization: WRED and the Rural Women's Business Networks." Now working at WRED, Samantha, among other duties, co-ordinates the 20 Rural Women's Business Networks around Ontario and nurtures the development of networks in new locations. She lives in Stratford, Ontario. Contact her at Women and Rural Economic Development, 423 Erie Street, Stratford, ON N5A 2N3 (tel) 800-790-9949, (e-mail) wred@info.org

