



# Drought Research Project

PREPARED BY **GREG IRETON** NOVEMBER 2008



St Vincent de Paul Society  
*good works*

# Attendees

## Mildura – 21 August 2008

Bill Antonie	Mildura Conference
Vi Barling	Merbein Conference
Danny Cotching	President, Sunraysia Region
Joe de Jong	Mildura Conference
Margot Farnsworth	Merbein Conference
Sr Rosemary Graham	Mildura Conference
Fr Frank Monaghan	Red Cliffs Conference
Bob Pollock	Red Cliffs Conference

## Horsham – 26 August 2008

Bride Schaefer	President, Wimmera Region
Joanne Thomas	Drought Response Officer, Hindmarsh Shire Council

## Traralgon – 28 August 2008

Pat Bourke	Sale Conference
Rachael Bowker	Membership & Development Officer
Sr Mary Fermio SJ	Pastoral Associate, St Mary's Parish Maffra
Frank Murphy	Queenscliff/Ocean Grove Conference
Dick Pepper	President, East Gippsland Region
Ann Sara	President, Gippsland Central Council

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# Foreword

**The St Vincent de Paul Society in Victoria has for some years been actively engaged in helping farmers and other members of rural communities in meeting the effects of the current drought.**

As part of this work we thought it important to get an objective assessment of our efforts and the result is this report from Greg Ireton, who specialises in community development issues.

The Society operates three rural Central Councils. This report focuses on our work in Gippsland and the North West of Victoria. Our experience tells us that if we were to include the North East the results would be similar to those recorded in the rest of the State.

We are making this report widely available in the hope that it will provide all sections of the community with a better understanding of the difficulties being endured by our fellow Australians in country Victoria.



**Jim Grealish**  
State President



# Introduction

**This report covers conversations held with local St Vincent de Paul Society conference members and other community leaders in Mildura, Horsham and Traralgon who represented the Sunraysia, Wimmera and Gippsland areas of the state respectively. These meetings were conducted in late August 2008.**

The meetings sought to identify some of the issues and challenges that both the organisation and communities have faced over recent years, most notable being with the drought, and the strategies and solutions that they have developed to address these challenges.

Each of the meetings lasted around two hours with discussion primarily guided by the input of attendees.

This report deals with each of these meetings in turn, covering the major points of discussion and then providing a brief synopsis of key themes.

A list of attendees is included on the inside front cover of this report.

# Mildura – 21 August 2008

## The community – issues and challenges

**The meeting in Mildura brought together representatives of conferences providing support for a large area of North West Victoria and into New South Wales. This included towns as far apart as Mildura, Robinvale, Ouyen and Wentworth.**

Farming across this area is quite diverse and typically covers such practices as dryland wheat, open grazing, irrigated horticulture, fruit, grapes, wineries and, of course, the extensive citrus growing of the Sunraysia. All of those attending felt strongly that the communities in the Sunraysia were different to elsewhere in Victoria and the fact that Sunraysia was built on irrigation, meant that the impact of drought and Government policies was not the same as on other parts of the State.

Although this impact is different on each of these agricultural practices and the communities that rely on them, there is general consensus that the effects of the drought have been felt for at least the last seven years. These impacts have never been as great as in the past two years. For Mildura, a town and community based on irrigation, the current water allocation of 0% (following 45% last year and 75% the year before) has once again forced the issue of drought and water availability to be the most discussed.

With many of these communities living on the border between States, the problems of trying to manage scarce resources based on geographical boundaries are further highlighted. Whilst there has been no water allocated for the Victorian growers as yet, those in New South Wales, using the same water, are entitled to 25% of their usual allocation.

Such discrepancies create division amongst communities that would often otherwise not differentiate between members of the community living north or south of the border but instead have a shared view of the communities that live and work along the Murray River.

As is the case in most rural areas, the drought has only served to highlight the range of issues currently being faced by farmers and farming communities. The members at the meeting recalled that, perhaps 30 years ago, a farmer could be viable on just 25 acres but viability now demands the availability of huge properties and economies of scale.

In the Sunraysia many of the problems can be traced back to the extensive grape plantings around 15 years ago and the subsequent wine glut that has been experienced in Australia over the last three to four years. During this same period the agriculture of the region has come under pressure from imported fruit (most notably oranges from Brazil and dried apricots from Turkey) and the rise of Managed Investment Funds (MIFs) with massive plantations of almonds, olives and blue gum timber.

The large scale importation of fruits has driven down the price for local produce, whilst the extensive MIF plantations, often growing plants with heavy water demands, have put further pressure on water prices in the area.

This period of time, that has also seen the ability to sell water and the “unbundling” of water entitlements from the land, has seen water being utilised more for immediate financial gain (and in the case of MIFs, being used to produce tax deductions for “wealthy people in the city”) rather than good agriculture practice. The significant reduction in the availability of water during these years of drought, coupled with the changing market utilisation of water, has certainly created dramatic pressures for the citrus growers of the Sunraysia as they try to support the constant water requirements of their citrus orchards, even when the price of water does not justify the low commodity prices available for any potential crop.

It was clear from the general discussion that, even though the farmers and growers of the area have diversified their production and changed their practices based on the water restrictions, there was a general feeling that the future of their community was governed more by the political value of water in ensuring votes in Adelaide and for feeding hungry plantations to provide tax deductions for the wealthiest of people, rather than being available for the farmers, growers and local community members.

## Changing demands

The St Vincent de Paul Society Resource Centre in Mildura is currently providing assistance to around 50 clients per week. This has been a significant increase over recent years but it has not been caused by the farmers and growers coming in for assistance. The increase to date has primarily been seen from the pensioners and other locals, particularly those in the town, on a fixed income. Perhaps a proportion of clients may no longer have access to temporary and seasonal work in agriculture, coupled with the increasing cost pressures of petrol, mortgage rates, rents and utilities, although there is no real agreement on this proportion amongst the conferences.

With the increased financial pressure on people of fixed or low income in the area, the St Vincent de Paul Society has found that assistance has been required with almost everything of a financial nature. This includes assistance required with paying for medicines from the chemist, utility bills, petrol, funeral expenses, clothing, food as well as education expenses.

It was noted that there has been a significant increase in the number of families and households on Centrelink assistance (particularly the exceptional circumstances) but the number of people who were ineligible was also notable. This included families with a family trust, with off-farm income and other reasons which have excluded them from the assistance that was typically provided for farming families in their situation.

## Changing assistance

It was considered that the people on the land are too proud and won't come through the door to ask for assistance. This is further compounded by the fact that these same people are likely to feel insulted if offered help. This has required the development of a range of different approaches to the delivery of support and often a change in what sort of support an organisation such as the St Vincent de Paul Society can provide.

Noting the complexity and lack of information around existing assistance the conferences in the Sunraysia area decided that if the people most in need were neither going to come through the door nor accept assistance if offered, they would work to make the assistance more locally appropriate and available to the people struggling on the land.

## Partnering and networking

The Country Women's Association (CWA) has, from time to time, made a range of grants available to farming families with money provided from both the Australian Government and Woolworths. The CWA in Victoria still has a large membership but the age of the membership now makes it more difficult for the organisation to be active at the local level in rural communities. St Vincent de Paul Society conferences in the Sunraysia area had the local expertise and knowledge to be able to directly contact those farming families that best represented the audience of the grants and to assist them in filling out the applications and obtaining the grants (typically around \$2,000 per grant). The St Vincent de Paul Society found that through this process assistance was obtained for many of the local women on the land for their families but unfortunately the funds always ran out much too quickly. This approach of working with CWA continued in the area with the local CWA branches donating goods (most particularly toiletries) to the St Vincent de Paul Society for distribution to farming families most in need.

In a similar approach the St Vincent de Paul Society conferences in the Sunraysia received a large volume of Christmas hampers from a donor in Sydney. These hampers were of excellent quality and valued at over \$160 each. Once again, using their unique knowledge of local families and the ability to talk to community members about people most in need, the St Vincent de Paul Society was able to ensure that the hampers went to the farming families, known locally as the blockies (those with fruit blocks) and the cockies (typically the dryland farmers), rather than the assistance going to only those who applied or asked for assistance. This program delivered over \$2,000,000 worth of assistance and was very well received by local farming families.

In the Sunraysia the local approach went one step further. Where there were towns that did not have a St Vincent de Paul Society presence, the conferences realised that the assistance could not be sufficiently targeted to those in need without local knowledge. The St Vincent de Paul Society partnered either with a local agency or with local community members to ensure that assistance was provided with the best local information and by people who were known and trusted by the local community. One of the comments from the Sunraysia members was that; “you really have to seek out those in need and listen to the neighbours. You can learn a lot but you really have to listen to what is being said”.

This approach is a significant step in overcoming the issues of providing assistance to people “too proud” to ask for help. The value of a local outreach program cannot be overstated in such situations and works well as a complementary assistance measure to the less targeted assistance such as the Commonwealth Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment.

It was clear that providing assistance to those most in need is best achieved by being in the local community, truly listening to what is being said, using local expertise and knowledge where available. This echoes one of the recurring themes in successful international development projects where assistance is most often successful when local agencies and local expertise are utilised. Under this model, the determination of assistance is made by local existing agencies rather than establishing new services and delivery mechanisms. This can overcome many of the issues created by attempting to determine needs from a regional or higher level.

The Merbein conference provides another example of the spontaneous development of a local network. The agencies and organisations in Merbein are now much more united than they have ever been in the past. It was discussed that previously there was very little communication between agencies and never discussion around those in need and assistance provided. Now agencies are much more open and likely to call the agency best placed to provide assistance when someone is in need. In particular, the close work between the local Australian Red Cross Society and the St Vincent de Paul Society was noted. All agencies were now showing much more compassion in the way they provided assistance and sought to ensure the most appropriate assistance was provided to people in need rather than just focusing on what their agency could provide.

This approach overcomes one of the key issues that restricted the assistance provided by agencies in the past. Prior to the sharing of local knowledge and programs, agencies were often reticent to provide assistance when they thought that this may either duplicate assistance provided by other agencies or create gaps in other areas. The open discussion and sharing of information enabled agencies to focus on services they are best able to provide and to target those geographic or demographic groups most suited to their capabilities.

## Supporting Schools

One of the key areas of involvement for the St Vincent de Paul Society has been schools and education for children. The conferences in the Sunraysia commented that in the past this assistance has always been delivered to families.

Again noting that many families were finding themselves in need for the first time and not keen to ask for support, the conferences decided to act proactively and directly contact the schools. The conferences contacted 49 schools and had positive responses from 35. These schools included not just Catholic but the State primary and high schools as well.

The schools were asked to let Vinnies know about the level of need in the schools and how funds could be used to provide direct support to children and their families (as the primary consideration) or, secondarily, assistance to pay for field trips that the children would otherwise not be able to attend or other direct needs.

The conferences believed that the school principals and school council were best placed to know the level of need within the school and were also better placed to know what other assistance (such as Department of Education) the children and families were already receiving.

Although the schools would be responsible for the distribution and utilisation of the funds, they were still required to provide specific information on the number of children, level of need, and cost of any field trips with which children would be assisted. The procedures were in place to ensure that funding was going towards children and families in need rather than being used by the school to offset field trip or extracurricular costs for all students.

The conferences were able to provide assistance to every school that requested assistance. A cap of approximately \$6,000 of assistance to any particular school was put in place.

It was excellent to see the conferences operating as facilitators in providing assistance and working with what was considered the most appropriate level to gather information and provide direct assistance. As the schools were already involved in some other forms of assistance, this approach provided a better coordinated and complementary approach.

## Focus on the community

Although the focus of the St Vincent de Paul Society is typically on the family, the impact of the drought and decline of rural communities was of paramount importance to the conferences in the Sunraysia. The local conferences broadened their approach to providing assistance, realising that often the best support for these families in the long term is a vibrant and active local community.

One way this was achieved was making funds available to ensure that important community events and services in local towns could continue. This included such things as the Mallee Rally, 100 year celebration of local schools and other community events, water for local football and sporting grounds and water for local swimming pools.

One of the benefits of maintaining these local activities was the opportunity for maintaining social contacts and giving an "excuse" to have a good chat. It was considered as a great opportunity for the blokes to have a chat amongst themselves in a way that wasn't often available to them. One comment was that "[at these events] the men really talk to one another and provide each other help".

Although this was considered equally beneficial for the women, it was the men that rarely sought out the opportunity to talk with other men and to take the time to express fears, concerns and to realise that they are part of a community.

The work of the St Vincent de Paul Society in Sunraysia wasn't limited to existing community events. Through the grapevine, the CWA and the St Vincent de Paul Society in Sunraysia had heard of the success of the 'Blockies & Cockies' event that was held in Echuca. It was decided that the CWA in the area along with the St Vincent de Paul Society would work towards having their own event for the local community.

Historically the CWA had their strength in the rural farming communities whilst the St Vincent de Paul Society were based in the towns and regional centres. Although this has changed somewhat over the years, it has meant that there had previously been very little interaction between the CWA and the St Vincent de Paul Society. This partnership with CWA was considered unique over past years as none of the St Vincent de Paul Society conferences could remember a time in the past that the St Vincent de Paul Society and CWA had worked together in providing assistance.

The event was aimed at providing a day away from the stress of all of the rural issues, an opportunity for people to "let their hair down" and have a chance to interact socially with other people from the community. The event organisation involved many of the local agencies with almost all agencies invited to participate.

## Building sustainability – Vinnies Budget Groceries

The relocation of the Vinnies Centre in Mildura and having a vacant building provided the opportunity for local conferences to look at a new venture for the organisation. The local Vinnies set about gaining support to develop a budget grocery store. Although the simplistic view of such a project would be that the store improves the availability of food and groceries to low income families, this project delivered much more.

To establish the venture, the St Vincent de Paul Society networked strongly with key agencies and organisations in the region. This included the involvement of State and local government, the local newspaper (Sunraysia Daily), Salvation Army, Mallee Family Care, welfare organisations, Church ministers, and a local training provider.

The training provider, ACCESS Mildura, delivered food handling training to 53 volunteers and staff free of charge. Predominately the organisation provided opportunities for the long term unemployed in the area and a number of the volunteers have already obtained other work in the area based on training and experience gained through the store.

Additionally, the store purchases produce that is grown locally whenever possible which delivers two additional benefits to the local community. The first is the support to local farmers and growers who can obtain a much better price for their product, even though the quantities in question are quite small. The second benefit is that the consumer can often purchase produce at a much lower cost and fresher than stock that has been transported long distances.

These two factors add significantly to the sustainability of the community and afford some protection from national and international impacts.

The grocery store further improved the welfare service availability in the local community by having food vouchers available through local welfare agencies for people to purchase food within the supermarket. This model provides choice to the people being supported, improves the appropriateness of the assistance, and reduces the stigma of receiving food parcels. Aligning welfare service delivery closer to basic consumer practice makes this assistance much more appropriate and accessible to clients who find themselves in need for the first time and would, most likely, make the transition for long term clients away from welfare much easier.

Mallee Family Care was also involved in the project and was undertaking an evaluation of clients' quality of life as well as providing other support to the store. The involvement of Mallee Family Care brings in the Primary Care Partnership and the broader community development and health and wellbeing strategic approach.

It was disappointing to hear that the Sunraysia Mallee Economic Development Board was asked to collaborate in the project but decided not to be involved. Although regional economic development boards can be patchy in their capabilities, expertise and experience, it would be useful for Vinnies to look at working specifically with such groups and the Area Consultative Committees (soon to be changed to Regional Development Australia Committees) due to the huge potential of such projects to provide trained and experienced workers in local communities.

This model fits strongly within the model of regional and rural development, rather than welfare, rather than welfare and should be marketed as such to get broader involvement. The involvement of a training provider and certification of training would assist in removing any doubts about the high level outcomes of such a project.

All attendees around the table agreed that this project would not have been possible without the extensive networking and involvement of many different agencies and service providers. It was also noted that such a big project would not have been possible without strong local leadership. In this case, the leadership was provided by Sr Rosemary Graham.

## Vinnies welfare services and ancillary assistance programs

The ongoing welfare services providing assistance such as food, school expenses, utility bills, clothing etc. continued to provide vital assistance to people in need.

The conference felt that they had sufficient resources to meet the most pressing needs of clients. The most notable group is still pensioners who struggle to find the finances to get through the fortnight until their next pay.

Access to programs such as No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS) has had an enormous benefit to those in need. The conferences noted that access to energy hardship programs has made a real difference to those struggling with bills.

## Role of Government

In discussing what the conferences thought the role of Government should be, the overwhelming response was for Government to reduce the cost of keeping the family farm.

Farmers can make choices about de-stocking, changing or reducing cropping and changing other farming practices to deal with the reduced income but they still face very large municipal rates, insurance, as well as paying water tariffs even when there is a zero allocation of water.

It was also noted that Government programs would be best focused in supporting and maintaining existing events within communities rather than establishing a myriad of small one-off events. It is also important for Government to ensure that community facilities are maintained such as swimming pools, and the watering of football ovals.

Finally there was discussion regarding the inadequacy of Centrelink payments, with so many families unable to afford food.

## Other lessons for Vinnies?

The group discussed whether there were any other matters or lessons for the St Vincent de Paul Society that hadn't been covered.

The group talked about the most effective use of funds and whether they should be used directly for families or whether they may be used to employ a local facilitator or outreach worker.

Overwhelmingly it was determined that the greatest benefit is to provide assistance directly to families wherever possible and that this shouldn't be reduced by the employment of someone in a coordination or advisory position.

# Horsham – 26 August 2008

## Community events

**The participants in this discussion were quite clear that the Western District communities are different from other parts of the State and that programs that worked in other areas would not necessarily work in the West.**

Where other areas of the State may have tried putting on new community events and barbeques, the Wimmera did not want any more 'booze and barbeques' events.

The Western Districts community has a rich and strong history with many organisations and community events that already exist. It is important that the primary goal is to support these events through money, meat for barbeques, lollies for school fetes and other support rather than creating new ones.

Where it was determined that a new event would be beneficial for the community, it is very important that the event also provided clear benefit to the attendees rather than being organised solely as a 'social gathering'.

One example of such an event would be the 2007 Rainbow Mallee Women's Muster.

## Rainbow Mallee Women's Muster

In May 2007, the local community put on an event that they called a Women's Muster with the subtitle of 'Leaning on the Gate - Learn, Reflect & Laugh'.

This event was supported by the Federal Government through a \$26,000 grant from FaCSIA.

The day had a range of complementary aims but ensured that attendees could gain information and ideas on a range of matters that would improve their ability to manage the family, the home, the finances as well as their health and well-being.

The topics included:

- Introduction to Share Trading
- Your role in the farming business
- Women's Health
- Reiki
- Belly dancing
- Men's health
- Flower arranging
- Beauty basics
- Gourmet dinner on a budget
- Naturopathy
- Gardening in a drought

The day was a huge success, based on both the attendance and the evaluations received. Participants loved the opportunity to learn new skills and find out about their health (with many referred back to the local GP or health service).

It was considered that part of the success for the day was that it wasn't particularly focused on drought as have been so many other events and information sessions, but provided advice and information that was important during a drought but also at many other times.

Even with such good feedback from participants, there were a number of points raised by the local conferences. There was a cover charge of \$25 for the day (covering morning tea, lunch and entry to all workshops) which wasn't all that well received but it was poorly understood that most of the money went straight back into the local community through hiring the hall, paying community groups for catering, purchasing of items from local stores, hiring local buses etc. There was also a problem with organising sufficient childcare for the day but this was dealt with through a variety of ways on the day with the support of the local council.

## Other events

The local groups agreed that, wherever possible, events should be free of charge or at least limited to a donation on entrance. Many families really struggle to find any money beyond what they need for food and bills and it is difficult to afford entrance fees for a family.

The groups had found that free events in the area were better supported than those that charged an entrance fee. The financial stress caused by the ongoing drought and rural decline has made it very difficult for families and businesses that have supported these events for many years, to continue to provide financial support. Rather than charging for these events the aim instead was to remove the burden from families and businesses and ensure that the events were supported in other ways from Government or other sources.

Local government was seen as playing a very important role in being able to obtain grants from a range of sources for community events and regularly providing in-kind support. This support was vital as it is difficult for local organisations to remain up to date with the range of different grants, dates for application or specific knowledge around successful applications.

## Planning for sustainable small towns

Discussion also covered the topic of reconsidering the number of assets and services present in small towns. Small Town Planning workshops had been conducted locally with the assistance of Government where the local community could contribute \$1,000 or 100 hours of community time to the process.

This allowed the community to critically evaluate the resources currently within the town, the time and cost of maintaining them and the options for the future. Often it was seen that it was better to support one town building and share it amongst all of the groups and community members rather than trying to maintain multiple buildings.

This building would usually be a local church that is shared amongst the groups. In Jeparit, there are six religions practised but all managed through one church and one Lutheran minister. This more ecumenical approach has worked well for the town and overcome many of the issues of very small congregations in small towns.

This approach has worked for sporting grounds as well.

## Emergency relief

The conferences in the Horsham area said that previously their focus had been on providing a "hand up" but had noted changing demands through the drought. They conceptualised the idea of a sideways grant that wasn't necessarily a hand up but was still important to the individual, family or community.

The best examples of this type of assistance was helping to fund school excursions where the child would otherwise miss out on the trip or assisting with the funding of community events to ensure that they could run.

## Changing the way of delivering welfare

It was noted that farmers are unwilling to put up their hand and ask for assistance even when there is no food on the table. The local conferences decided that it was necessary for them to seek out those in need rather than wait for farmers and farming families to come in and ask for assistance.

This was achieved through working with local contacts in communities and using a range of sources of information to try to identify those who would really benefit from assistance.

The groups approached the stigma that many farmers face when receiving assistance in a number of ways noting that one solution would not suit everyone. Christmas hampers were offered along with fuel vouchers from BP that families could arrange to come and pick up at a time and location suitable for them.

Rather than providing farming families with the St Vincent de Paul Society vouchers, conferences often went out and did the shopping for the families after finding out what they needed and assisted with paying utility bills. This removed the need for families to go into local stores and use vouchers to pay for their food.

In other areas supermarket vouchers were used with differing results. Most of the time Coles and Safeway vouchers were preferred as they did not have to be spent in the local town (possibly increasing stigma) but it was sometimes problematic to have to drive into Horsham, as well as the fact that money wasn't going back into the local community. Being able to supply Gift Cards from the large supermarkets was seen as an excellent move away from "welfare type" vouchers.

For many families the trip into a regional centre is difficult and local shopping is preferred. Where there isn't a St Vincent de Paul Society conference within the town to do the shopping, a neighbouring conference would contact the supermarket and allow the family to purchase food up to a certain limit (usually around \$150 depending on the size of the family). The ability of the family to choose their own food and having the money going back into the local community were seen as important aspects of this approach.

## A networked approach

Due to the range of agencies that were involved in providing relief, the increasing demand and large geographic area, the conference worked strongly with other agencies to ensure a coordinated and complementary approach.

Food relief was coordinated through the Christian Emergency Foodbank whenever possible. Wimmera Uniting Care would contact the St Vincent de Paul Society when they were aware of families in need.

This more coordinated approach had come about following some problems with providing assistance earlier on. For example some families had received five Christmas hampers due to the range of organisations running their own programs and not talking to other agencies in the area.

The Shire of Hindmarsh has established a support network of all the service providers whether their focus is on mental, social or financial issues. This network has helped to build a shared understanding of the range of supports available and a coordinated approach to the delivery of services. Agencies involved in this network are also able to focus more on their core services knowing that they can refer to other organisations and agencies for a range of other supports.

This has been replicated in some other areas through other shires or through Primary Care Partnerships that form what was described as a 'cluster group' of agencies. The geographic boundaries of these groupings is usually locally determined and based broadly on like communities and the towns that people tend to associate with in the local area.

The local St Vincent de Paul Society conference considered that it was still necessary to improve the coordination but that they had been noticing the demand for their services decreasing due to the coordination with other groups.

This networked approach also meant that information about new programs and services was quickly disseminated amongst agencies. The availability of No Interest Loans Scheme (NILS) was one such program which had made a significant difference in the area and provided lessons for other programs.

Since the Department of Human Services funding for a regional drought coordinator had finished, there has been a real lack of information about grants available and other funding opportunities. The Primary Care Partnership has started to do some more work around coordination and the Department of Planning and Community Development had started a new drought program in the area as well.

## Getting the information out

There was still a lack of knowledge amongst people in the community about the range of services that are available. It was important to ensure that information was regularly in newspapers and distributed as part of a drought brochure or similar so that people had access to information about services when they needed it.

The groups in the local area had overcome some of these issues by working with existing groups in the area. By getting involved with groups such as the Country Women's Association, Landcare, Top Crop, casserole lunches and other community events, it was possible to ensure that people within these groups (often the community leaders) would know about the range of services and supports available. People were then in the position to either access the services themselves or let other people know about them.

With the stress that many families are under, the burden of work and details that need to be dealt with, any one form of communication was seen to be insufficient. Getting out and talking to people is still considered the best way to pass on a message in the Western Districts but it should be supported by information in the papers and pamphlets to ensure that you also capture those people no longer turning up to groups and community events.

## Supporting the volunteers

The impact on the volunteers in supporting families and communities over such a long period was also noted. Often it was just the financial cost to volunteers of driving their car to provide assistance or support families that was the really difficult part although few volunteers would ask for financial assistance with these costs.

The Shire of Hindmarsh provided an example of a good way to thank volunteers for their work. The Shire organised a volunteer day that involved, amongst other things, "laughter therapy" to help people see the brighter side of things. Along with the volunteer day, the Shire provided a voucher for each volunteer for them to have a coffee and a cake at the local bakery at a time that was suitable to them.

Often volunteer recognition events are unsuccessful as they are held during business hours when working people, parents or even people with volunteering commitments during the day may be unavailable to attend. By providing vouchers, the Shire made this recognition flexible and of value to all volunteers in the area. The use of vouchers from the local bakery also ensured some money going back into the local community.

The value of volunteerism within communities is often poorly understood and recognition can often be viewed as less important or of lower dollar value than it should be. The following year the Shire of Hindmarsh considered that the recognition should be more tightly regulated and that a morning tea would be held instead. This lack of flexibility resulted in only one volunteer turning up on the day.

The grants program, offered by the Victorian Government Department of Planning and Community Development, that provided financial assistance with volunteer expenses was seen as a great program.

Many of the volunteers in the area felt emotionally, financially and physically drained and the opportunity to receive something back, however small, was considered very important. It was considered that another great idea would be putting on a free meal at the pub for the local volunteers and their families.

The burden on volunteers was considered to be due to causes other than just changing demographics within communities. Many programs that would have previously had paid employees are now reliant on volunteers. These include the volunteer reading program and the volunteer ambulance service which has seven volunteers in Hindmarsh and no paid drivers.

Examples such as this and other forms of cost shifting by Government to community organisations (such as Centrelink breaching) has increased the burden on both the volunteers and the conferences.

Due to this shortage of volunteers and the overwhelming demand, the St Vincent de Paul Society conferences in the area have started co-opting volunteers from other organisations to assist them in undertaking services such as shopping for clients and performing outreach services in towns not currently with a St Vincent de Paul Society presence.

This approach has had an unexpected benefit in that all of the organisations involved have found that the services for the families in need have been much better coordinated and the distribution of resources and support as well as the case management has been much improved.

## Increasingly complex needs

An additional burden on organisations in rural and regional areas is the increasing complexity of needs, most particularly due to low-income families moving out from Melbourne to access more affordable housing.

Local groups struggled to adequately support these families due to a range of factors including:

- Lack of specialist support services to refer clients to
- Families and individuals often being ostracised from communities
- Lack of skills and knowledge amongst volunteers in dealing with complex drug and mental health issues

The Department of Justice also utilises some small towns such as Rainbow and Jeparit for the relocation of offenders but without providing any support or services from Government.

## Role of Government

A number of programs or issues were seen as key areas for Government intervention.

### Infrastructure grants

One of the most important programs for the community was the Regional Community Infrastructure grants delivered through the Victorian Government. There was approximately \$400,000 for each shire which allowed around \$60,000-80,000 to be spent in each of the main towns.

This funding enabled the upgrading of a range of sporting facilities such as the tennis courts in Rainbow and the bowling greens in Nhill. The Shire of Hindmarsh also hosted a community sports day and festival which was very well received.

### Community based training

The local shires have been struggling to find suitably qualified home help staff to deliver services within local towns. There is typically a requirement by training bodies to have a minimum number of people to run a training course which is too high for most small towns and the locals cannot afford to be travelling into the large regional centres.

There is a clear demand in the smaller towns for Certificate III and higher levels of training from both the residents and the employers but there is insufficient critical mass to induce training providers into the local area. This situation reinforces a situation of a lack of employment opportunities and a lack of services provided to these communities.

A successful program had been run by VECCI (funding has since ceased) which assisted small business with funding to take on apprentices, assist them with their tools and training, and small business officers to help support the business.

## Sustaining families and farms

The Grains Research & Development Corporation (GRDC) had run a program locally which assisted farm families with succession planning and other important aspects of farm business planning.

This was quite different to the Primary Care Partnership program which focused strongly on health. The GRDC program instead started to address the huge problems with succession planning, particularly amongst elderly farmers.

The lack of adequate succession planning has been seen as a huge burden on farming communities and reduces the opportunities to keep farms in the family's possession. Appropriate assistance with this problem is seen as vital.

# Traralgon – 28 August 2008

**The conferences present for this discussion covered the area from around Cowes, across to Mallacouta and up to Omeo.**

The Gippsland community has been experiencing very dry conditions since around 2000 and probably from around 1997 in the East. The farmers in the irrigation areas have been without any significant income for a very long time.

The irrigation in Gippsland is based on annual storages and so if it doesn't fill up in any particular year then the farming community will struggle the following year. There have been some reasonable seasons over this period of time but they have been infrequent.

The awareness of the conferences in Gippsland to the level of community need was significantly heightened following the 2003 bushfires. This event brought direct involvement for the conferences with a range of different communities and families that would not typically seek assistance from the St Vincent de Paul Society. This was seen as the first departure from the typical St Vincent de Paul Society program.

## A coordinated approach

This coordination was very difficult in 2003 as the Shires had very little idea of disaster management during an emergency event. This changed dramatically with the fires in 2006 with much better coordination at all levels. By the time the region experienced the floods in 2007 the Shires were well placed to respond and provide coordination across all organisations and agencies operating in the area. The Shire brought in ex-Police coordinators to assist in the coordination of the recovery which worked extremely well.

In regard to drought, the Wellington Shire was the first to establish a drought coordination group. This enabled coordination across the range of agencies and organisations that were providing support and a comprehensive list of the supports available was produced, informing not only the farming families but also the organisations.

The conferences were able to provide immediate assistance to the community following the floods with the close working relationships that they had developed through the drought coordination group.

Work by the Department of Primary Industries and Department of Human Services was also noted as very important in this region. The staff were proactive and went to visit farms and farming families. The Centrelink drought bus was also popular with services being provided in local towns rather than relying on families to make the trip into the large regional towns.

Later a drought committee was formed in East Gippsland Shire with a broad range of members including the St Vincent de Paul Society, Victorian Council of Churches, Salvation Army, Community Health Services, Regional Development Victoria, Department of Human Services and Department of Primary Industries amongst others.

For all of these events, the assistance was managed through the local government emergency management arrangements which brought a much higher level of coordination and cooperation than had been seen previously.

In East Gippsland Shire, all agencies report to the East Gippsland Recovery Committee and have clear roles and responsibilities. There was seen to be a reduction in duplication for both assistance and services with this approach. Another benefit was access to highly detailed mapping through Government of affected areas and where people were living.

Within this process Vinnies were able to provide bedding, clothing, short-term hostel/motel accommodation and food. The organisation had internal mechanisms in place to ensure that these requests could always be met.

## Identifying those in need

From the fires and through the drought the local conferences realised that there were many families in need that wouldn't come in to ask for assistance. They started out by talking to farmers and gaining some information and advice on those that might be doing it tough.

Further information was gained through the Department of Human Services, Shire emergency management teams, and Uniting Care.

The conferences used this information to distribute food parcels to many of these households. One family said that the food parcel had "saved their lives".

Along with the food parcels, the conferences distributed a range of information about the services and supports that were available to families in need. Many of the families had no idea of the support that was available and the information was gratefully received.

The conferences also used local community meetings to let people know about the range of services and assistance that they could provide. The attendees of these meetings were more likely to be the community leaders rather than those in need but it was likely that they would pass the information on to those most in need.

Following the 2003 bushfires, there was no St Vincent de Paul Society presence in the high country around Omeo and Benambra. A local priest was able to identify those in need in the area and the organisation co-opted six people from the local community to form a committee. The conferences then channelled the assistance through this local committee to ensure that it was used in the most appropriate and effective way.

The use of local people for the distribution of assistance was seen as vital as these people understood the community and knew who was in need. The St Vincent de Paul Society conferences in the region were more experienced with delivering assistance to those in the larger towns rather than the very small mountain communities. In these circumstances, outside organisations often struggle to identify those most in need in small communities.

Another example to demonstrate this was the hay and fodder that was donated to farmers in the region. This program was managed from a State and regional level and it is widely thought that the bulk of the hay and fodder went to those who really didn't need it and those in most need missed out.

## The use of outreach

In many areas the conferences were able to identify others in need through dropping in for a chat around the kitchen table. The time taken in speaking with families often identified areas of need or referrals to other families who might require some assistance.

The organisation also received referrals from Animal Welfare officers who visited many of the farms particularly where the animals were malnourished due to the family not being able to afford suitable fodder.

The conferences believed that it was only through the extensive networking that they did with Government, other agencies and the community in general that they were able to identify many of those in need.

They also noted the importance of “closing the loop” following a visit or giving assistance to a family. The conferences were well respected and referrals often made due to the fact that they would always get back in touch with an agency or Government officer that had referred them on to someone just to let them know that they had followed up on the matter.

The conferences commented that the coordination was improving all the time and that this was typically due to the regular coordination meetings, getting to know each other, getting to know the agencies that you can rely on, and when agencies “close the loop” following referrals.

This close working arrangement meant that it wasn’t necessary to follow up on every need as an agency as you were able to focus on core services and assistance and then refer to the most appropriate agencies or agencies to meet the other needs.

## **Tambo Upper/Licola Fires (2006)**

Another example of working with the local community was in the Tambo Upper/Licola fires. There were approximately 10-12 farms affected in the area.

The St Vincent de Paul Society worked through the local primary school principal as well as one of the local farming families that wasn’t affected. The local stock and station agent also assisted with coordinating the support across other agencies involved.

There was no hand out of money in this area but credits at local stores were organised to ensure that the most important needs could be met. It was the local people once again that were able to assist in identifying those in need as well as providing some assistance with furniture and clothing that might be needed.

The use of local credits was seen as very important as the locals were not used to receiving assistance and the credits allowed them to go to the local stores and purchase what they needed.

It was noted that the use of local stores isn’t always appropriate (very dependent on the local community) and the conferences have moved more towards using Coles, Safeway and fuel ‘Gift Cards’ as there is much less chance of stigma with this form of assistance. This is a move away from the St Vincent de Paul Society vouchers and use of local shops but is sometimes necessary.

Particularly for families who are not used to dealing with the St Vincent de Paul Society or other agencies, it is important for conferences to consider other ways to assist them such as purchasing food for them, organising store credits and paying bills and invoices rather than relying of the St Vincent de Paul Society vouchers or second hand goods.

## **Community events**

One of the most successful events locally were the “Pamper Days”. The first one was held in Yarram and allowed women in the area to spend the day together (often talking about their husbands) and getting away from the farm for a day.

The day demystified the stigma of seeking assistance for many of the women as they found out about general and mental health issues in a relaxed and enjoyable environment. Many of the women commented that they were very concerned about their husbands and that the men wouldn’t talk about issues and stresses.

Another very successful event was the “Dealing with loss & change” talks. These were organised by the Latrobe Valley Health Service and Centacare. It involved a 1½ hour session with a free lunch at the pub. The participants received a manual that they took home and could refer to or use whenever they felt the need. It enabled people to identify the key issues and work out a set of manageable steps that they could use to move forward with these issues.

## Extending the networking

In Gippsland in particular, the use of networks went well beyond local agencies. The parish of Keysborough in Melbourne partnered with the Heyfield conference through the drought and continued this assistance through the bushfires. The assistance contributed by the Melbourne parish consisted of car-loads of toiletries as well as money to support the work of the local conference.

The approach of partnering with a local agency provides a number of benefits during the provision of assistance. Often metropolitan-based communities and church groups have a limited understanding of the local situation, needs and challenges. The use of a local partner enables the assistance provided to be tailored to local need and to reduce the burden on local agencies in dealing with often overwhelming and inappropriate donations.

## Combining assistance for complex needs

The close work between agencies, local government, state government and health services enabled a much better case coordination approach for more complex needs. Often any single agency is able to meet only a limited amount of individual and household needs.

The local agencies worked closely together to identify the range of needs in particular cases and to ensure that the range of assistance was used in the most appropriate way to address these needs. This often included organising financial assistance from State and Federal Governments, store vouchers, material aid, whitegoods from the Baptist Church, further financial aid from the local relief fund (Gippsland Emergency Relief Fund) and assistance from local government with building and land issues.

This coordinated approach reduced the burden on households and individuals and ensured that the assistance was provided in a way to provide the greatest benefit. With other uncoordinated approaches, financial assistance can often be used to purchase items that are available as donations or services that are free of charge. By organising these all together the affected household is able to deal with the most immediate matters and utilise the often limited financial assistance for those items which are not otherwise available through agencies and other relief activities.

## Accountability

With the range of disasters and community challenges that the Gippsland Conference had dealt with, the discussion moved on to how conferences managed the distribution of funds and assistance.

All of those present agreed that it was important to ensure accountability with the way funds and assistance were distributed. The internal mechanisms for distributing funds were considered excellent and allowed local volunteers to have the resources that they needed to provide assistance (this had been made easier by the excellent performance of the stores which has allowed extra money for local work).

To ensure this accountability, it was considered important not to be “too generous” but that it would be impossible to exclude the occasional person accessing assistance beyond what would be considered appropriate. It was also noted that there are people who will tend to “over use” the system without the appropriate controls at the local level.

One comment was that “if you work for the St Vincent de Paul Society and you haven’t been *‘had’* then you’re not doing your job properly”, which was further supported by a comment that it is “better to be *‘had’* than be hard”.

The discussion and the comments in particular indicate that the local conferences are well aware of the importance of accountability and equity in the provision of assistance but that they take a pragmatic approach which will enable them to provide assistance in a timely and un-bureaucratic way that limits any undue burden on recipients.

# Conclusion

**The stories and ideas collected from these meetings are clear in the benefits of local strategies and innovations that have been developed by conferences during very difficult times.**

The structure and governance of the St Vincent de Paul Society has allowed the development of local approaches that manage both the challenges and resource limitations of local conferences as well as the unique needs of communities in different parts of rural and regional Victoria.

The previous sections are illustrative of the benefits of the locally developed approaches and just a few key points are quickly summarised here.

## The role of networking in improving collaboration

Conferences at all meetings noted the importance of developing strong local networks. In all areas, the development of networks was credited with a significant improvement in:

- Identifying those in need
- Reducing duplication in service delivery
- Reducing the number of people missing out on services
- Improving the effectiveness of assistance by utilising the most appropriate agency
- Improving awareness amongst agencies of services available
- Improving access to external sources for grants and material aid
- Improving access to volunteer resources

The development and ongoing management of networks requires good leadership. In some situations this leadership was provided by local or State Government but this role has also been successfully performed by the St Vincent de Paul Society.

Where local networking does not exist, this is probably the single most effective activity that the St Vincent de Paul Society could undertake (where possible in conjunction with local Government) to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of local service provision.

This networked and collaborative approach has also been demonstrated to be very successful in developing community events as well as community capacity building activities such as the Vinnies Budget Grocery in Mildura.

## The role of facilitation in improving efficiency and effectiveness

Another important role demonstrated through these meetings is the ability of local conferences to facilitate the provision of resources and services either where these resources are made available from a state or regional level, or to coordinate other agencies in providing assistance in areas without a St Vincent de Paul Society presence.

This role is strongly linked with the development of local networks but steps away from the need to focus solely on resources and services provided by the St Vincent de Paul Society.

The strength that the organisation brings in local knowledge and capability provides a fantastic resource to other agencies such as Country Women's Association, metropolitan based services as well as Government in providing locally appropriate and knowledgeable assistance.

## The role of innovation in meeting changing needs

All meetings agreed that different areas of the State are unique in the demands and challenges and that this has a strong effect on the way services can and should be delivered.

Society and communities in general are now also facing challenges that are markedly different to those faced over past decades. The most notable departure from past approaches in recent times has been the proactive approach from conferences in all areas investigated to identify those in need and provide direct assistance (in a range of different ways) rather than relying on providing assistance to households known to the organisation or requesting assistance.

The St Vincent de Paul Society is uniquely placed, with local discretion over programs, to be able to continually improve and innovate service delivery. This approach will allow the services, the supports, and the organisation to remain relevant and viable in a time of increasing demands on the organisation and challenges in managing both financial and volunteer resources.

Whilst noting the regional differences, the similarities in approaches suggests that there is significant merit in ensuring that local innovations and ideas are captured whenever possible and made known to conferences operating in other areas. This process can be further improved by using local networks as a vehicle to capture and record innovations, programs and approaches that have applicability at a State, national and international level.

## Using local people in service delivery

The locally-based service delivery of the organisation provides an ability to deliver locally appropriate and effective services that few other organisations can match over such a broad geographic area.

It was reassuring to see that conferences sought out and co-opted locals in areas that they did not have local knowledge to maintain this approach. This has long been held as "best practice" in international development practice.

Such an approach also significantly improves the access of the organisation to volunteers who are willing to provide assistance in times of crisis but may not otherwise wish to formally join the St Vincent de Paul Society.



**St Vincent de Paul Society**  
*good works*

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