

Ruah Community Services

Submission to: *Focus on the Future:*
Opportunities for Sustainability in Western Australia,
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Sustainability and Work: Microenterprise, social cohesion and The Big Issue

In Western Australia, there are few, if any, programs that provide income generation *and* social inclusion benefits for marginalised people. In this submission, microenterprise, particularly The Big Issue homeless street magazine project, is discussed as a innovative approach which has demonstrated a capacity elsewhere to contribute to social cohesion, hope and income generation for disadvantaged people

Ruah Community Services provides services for 2,000 – 3,000 people a year, who are homeless and/or living with mental illness, and/or experiencing domestic violence and/or in transition from prison, and/or with problematic substance use. Support services are provided across the inner city, Rockingham, Fremantle, Maddington, Lower North and a refuge operates in Highgate.

Sustainable jobs growth, pathways from poverty, and environmental sustainability are being increasingly addressed overseas, in the first and particularly in the third world, through micro-enterprise and microfinance for the most disadvantaged people. (Microenterprise Innovation Unit <http://www.mip.org> accessed 24 April. 2002; The Virtual Library on Microcredit (search for 'microenterprise' on:) <http://www.gdrc.org/icm> accessed on 15th April; The Big Issue <http://www.bigissue.co.uk/intro.html> 21 Dec 01.)

Government, non-government sector and business community all have a useful role in the development of micro-enterprise projects, because each has particular strengths to contribute in the achievement of the social justice; welfare *and* entrepreneurial goals of microenterprise.

There is evidence that microenterprise can contribute to an increase in social cohesion. The stories of crime reduction and hope below are examples of what can happen when homeless people have paid work and supported self help.

REAL LIVES, REAL STORIES, REAL FUTURES: – THE BIG ISSUE
VENDORS UK, AUSTRALIA, SOUTH AFRICA

- § When they started selling The Big Issue, two thirds of vendors said their self-confidence and motivation to change their lives had increased.
- § A third would turn to crime if they didn't sell the magazine. For nine out of 10, it reduced the need to beg on the streets. 77 per cent had been regularly drinking alcohol outside, before they started selling The Big Issue. Of those, 68 per cent said they drank outside less now, despite having more money in their pockets.
- § Nearly one in three had begged before they became homeless and over four in five before they sold The Big Issue.
- § 74 per cent said that they now slept rough less than before since they started selling the magazine.
- § 93 per cent of vendors liked selling the magazine with 63 per cent declaring that the best thing about it was meeting members of the public. One in five were selling because they were still on the streets but nearly half had continued selling the magazine because it was their only source of income or they needed to supplement their limited income.
- § Selling The Big Issue is more than a job. 69 per cent of vendors felt their self-confidence had been boosted by selling the magazine and a similar proportion felt that it had increased their motivation to change things in their lives. (Summary of research findings, Bill Manallack; The Big Issue, Melbourne, January 2002)

The microenterprise approach sits outside conventional welfare practice in WA; and so there are few, if any, opportunities for self-help, income generation and support for people with multidimensional barriers to constructive participation in society and work.

Ruah Community Services currently has a funding submission before the Lotteries Commission to establish The Big Issue in WA. Given the benefits that this type of microenterprise project have provided to homeless people in many countries (see links to other overseas homeless street papers at:

<http://www.realchangenews.org/links/index.html> accessed 15 January, 2002); this

project has potential to break new ground direction in WA with respect to sustainability, hope for the future and income generation for people experiencing social exclusion.