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Alistair Sands  
Secretary,  
Senate Inquiry into the Regional Partnerships Programme,

Dear Mr Sands,

Please present this submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Regional Partnerships Programme. I realise that the closing date for submissions has lapsed so would like to appeal for grace by the committee in accepting it.

Submission:

My submission to the Senate Inquiry into the Regional Partnerships Programme relates to the Sustainable Regions programme in the Far North East of NSW. In particular it relates to the funding of the Screenworks project, and the general allocation process for the Far North Coast region.

My concerns relating to Screenworks being funded by the Sustainable Regions scheme include:

- Screenworks was not a sustainable business case, is completely grant-dependent for operational services therefore continues to take much of the ad-hoc grant funding available in the area for the provision of services by other more established groups. Although Screenworks has provided appreciated services over the three years it was funded by the Sustainable Regions programme, it was never going to increase the capacity of the region in this area, or be a self-supporting enterprise;
- Despite proving not to be a sustainable operation, Screenworks has just been given another \$120,000 by the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts: a grant that may conceal the unsustainability of the Screenworks venture as proposed under the initial Sustainable Regions grant;
- Screenworks claimed their project represented the region (including benefits for Lismore and LINC TV) which meant that if other groups applied for funding for audio-visual development (including for sustainable services) it may be perceived that funding had already been allocated for this general area.

My concerns related to the administration and allocation of funds via the Sustainable Regions Programme include:

- The process by which the community determined spending priorities was not properly advertised, and it was easily distorted to suit particular interests;
- The Advisory Committee was appointed by the Federal Government and was not representative of the range of views and interests of the North Coast Community – it appeared to be very sympathetic to the electoral aims of particular sitting National Party members.

### **History**

I was a participant in the “community consultation” process, in particular the meeting at the Lismore Council Chambers in, I think, late 2001. I was there as a member of a community media group in Lismore – including LINC TV, 2NCR and North Coast CAMERA. We were interested in applying for one-off funding for a community media centre (the MediaXchange – an evolution from the name of the International North Coast New Media Centre - a concept that had been around for a few years). It was proposed that the MediaXchange be built in the CBD of Lismore (the cultural precinct of the Art in the Heart site). The project had previously received \$27,500 from the Regional Solutions programme in 2001 to produce a business plan, which was written and suggested that it proceed with funding from possibly a variety of sources – including Lismore City Council, Southern Cross University or TAFE, the combined resources and infrastructure of the community groups and possibly also a one-off grant from the Federal Government through a regional development scheme such as this. The MediaXchange would be a sustainable centre of training and media activity providing an outlet and facility for video production and profiling-building for the region’s youth in particular. Audio-visual product produced at the MediaXchange would be distributed through the national and international community TV and radio networks, as well as showcased locally. It would build ongoing local employment (both internally and externally to the centre) be sustained from station operating funds including sponsorships.

The merits and concerns of our particular proposal beside: I felt as though the community consultation process designed to determine community priorities in Ballina, Lismore and Murwillumbah was fundamentally flawed.

The community consultation session was marketed in the local press as an “information session” and it was only made apparent after participants arrived at the venue there was going to be a vote to determine the regional priorities for spending the \$12 million allocated for the region. Most people there were interested in their own schemes being funded, and so rallied with others and friends to stack the votes, some people went to more than one “information session” (they were held in three locations) once they knew what the process was. It was in no way reflective of broader community priorities or needs. The Advisory Committee was also appointed beforehand, and appeared to be narrow in its range of political perspectives. It contained a local timber merchant (Lexie

Hurford - now resigned), a property developer and hotelier (Chris Condon), local Mayor (Ernie Bennett), and media production manager (Greg Redman – who I can't find any further information on), and a solicitor and property developer (Robin Amos). It wasn't reflective of broader political or social attributes of the region, let alone the expertise needed to assess some of the funding applications.

LINC TV put in an expression of interest (EOI) for the first funding round of this programme but was not funded. Since then LINC has had to undergo a series of reviews by the ABA (now the AMCA) so did not put in further applications. However a group of relatively high-profile regional film-makers from Byron Bay – Screenworks – was funded by the first tranche of the Sustainable Regions funds in this area. Apparently they claimed they represented LINC TV (amongst other regional organisations) in their application but, when asked, refused to give us a copy of their grant application to see how our name had been used. We had previously submitted competing grant applications with Screenworks for funding under the Regional Solutions fund.

Screenworks was funded \$354,200 under the Sustainable Regions programme, and received further funding from the NSW Film and Television Office for the provision of particular training schemes. The funding for Screenworks was announced locally in Byron Bay by the then sitting National Party member Larry Anthony in the very marginal seat of Richmond (LINC TV's application was for the less marginal seat of Page – also held by a National Party member). It was clear that Mr Anthony had to gain support from the increasingly liberal-green vote to win this electorate in the 2004 Federal election – and photo opportunities with relatively high-profile film-makers in the region may have been seen as electorally advantageous.

With that \$354,200, Screenworks provided subsidised training, information and networking sessions for three years, as well as set up a website database and organised a agreements between local councils on filming. Many of those activities competed with other organisations in the region – including the video access and training group North Coast CAMERA based in Lismore – which has subsequently ceased to operate.

At the end of the three years funding from this programme Screenworks was desperate to find a way to continue to maintain services as none of its existing positions or web-based activities were self-funding. Manager of Screenworks, Kate Ingram, told me at the Ozeculture conference in Byron in April this year that she considered that her job would dissolve at the end of the Sustainable Regions funding (later in 2005). She told me that it was impossible to create a sustainable business for Screenworks in the time they were funded (3 years), and they would be dedicating significant time to seeking further funding from other government sources. They had approached a number of other government bodies – such as NSW agencies but had not received any assurances of on-going support. On the brink of moving to a drastically reduced operational mode, Screenworks proposed a web-portal for audio-visual distribution which has just been granted another \$120,000 from the Department of Communications IT and the Arts (DCITA). The web-portal proposed was entitled "ScreenXchange".

Since I have not seen their grant application it is difficult for me to see how Screenworks originally claimed to have been sustainable, but it seems as though the decision to fund this organisation may be perceived to be political, and did not take into account other services in the region. It seems as though the unsustainability of Screenworks has now also been hidden by the granting of another \$120,000 of Federal Government funds.

I hope the committee has found this perspective on the process informative,

Yours sincerely,

Alicia Cameron  
Chair – LINC TV.