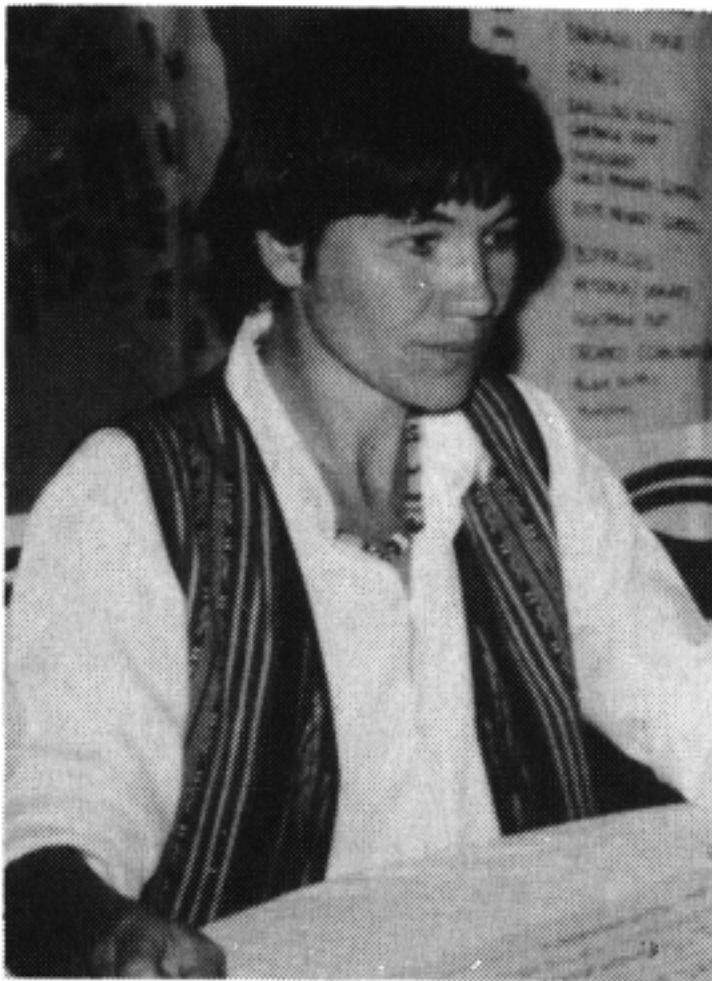


Networking in the Midlands

THE Midlands Rural Development Network (Midnet) is made up of a core of 13 non-government and service organisations working in the Natal Midlands and north western Natal. Here Tessa Cousins, newly elected chairperson of the network tells us more about Midnet.



"DISCUSSIONS between individuals about the need to network rural development NGOs in the Natal Midlands led to AFRA hosting people from a range of organisations at a weekend braai early in 1991. People came with their families, played volleyball and took some time out to discuss networking. We decided to come together like this on a Saturday every second month, each time being hosted by a different organisation. We could learn about one another's work in an informal setting, recognising that much successful networking is built on personal relationships.

Almost two years later, in September 1992, an expanded grouping adopted a constitution and elected an executive committee.

It is said that the way an organisation is born will shape it, and despite all its activity Midnet retains the open, friendly atmosphere of the first informal meetings. We have also kept to meeting every two months on a Saturday, each time at a different project.

About a year ago we recognised that we were becoming a formal body, and started work on a constitution. We started by drawing together our thinking on the aims and values we shared before deciding on what structures would best meet our needs. The major objective that emerged was the need to exchange ideas and information, to take us beyond the limitations of our skills and to enable us

to give more complete service to communities. We saw a need for an autonomous non-governmental grouping with the potential for policy input on regional matters. We sought common ground around our concern for rural underdevelopment, rather than placing as a prerequisite that we share ideology and perspective. Individuals from government or parastatal bodies do attend our bi-monthly meetings which are open. Individuals may also join as affiliate members, who can join in activities but do not have voting rights. This allows us to build relationships with people on the ground while retaining our base as an NGO body.

The structure is simple. There are bi-monthly general meetings and the three working groups we have meet as they see the need. The executive is made up seven members, each from a different member organisation, and it meets monthly.

In the past six months the network has been receiving increasing numbers requests for it to participate in initiatives. There is such a dearth of rural structures that those wishing to work with rural people or rural issues do not have many channels to go through. There is both opportunity and danger here for us. The benefits of wider networking and engagement are clear to all members, but equally the capacity of individuals and organisations is often