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Countering Rural Policy Impacts: Community Development Initiatives for Local Control

Introduction
The Federal Government recently made a promise to rural Australians to maintain service provision in rural communities at present levels. The Government’s assurances somewhat belatedly recognise the detrimental impact of past policies and also fail to acknowledge that the extent of the damage done to many rural communities calls for more than just maintenance of the status quo (see e.g. 7.30 Report ABC Television, January 31st 2000). A number of the most socio-economically decimated areas will need substantial community development if they are to be viable in the future. The success of such community development initiatives will depend, in the first instance, on recognition of what has actually been lost, as well as on knowledge of the potential barriers or impediments to achieving such development.

Two case studies in a participatory social research project were conducted in rural communities in the State of Victoria, Australia, during 1998-9. The research was inspired by changes which have occurred in rural areas of Australia over the past two decades, within the context of policy changes at global, national and local levels, and political neglect of the needs of electoral constituents in rural and remote areas. Hopetoun in the far north west and Penshurst in the south west of Victoria were included in the case studies which examined the cascading effects of economic and social policy changes on residents in the towns (Hallebone et al. 2000a).

Set within the framework of rural research and policy literature, and recognising the cumulative effects of policy changes generated from outside the towns, this article provides an interpretation of recent attempts at community developments and their potential for success in the two towns. Key responses to change propelled by community residents are identified, along with some of the perceived impediments to desired community development and possibilities for other changes.

Background
Compared with residents of coastal urban settlements and some regional metropolitan cities, rural Australian residents are generally more disadvantaged. Rural towns in Victoria are faced with changing demographic, social and economic profiles. Communities are experiencing shifts in population with their young people moving away leaving an ageing and smaller population with a less powerful political voice. The problems posed by these changes are compounded in that available work options to rural communities are limited predominantly to agricultural productivity. Taken together, these factors lead to a loss of stability within rural towns.

In this article, it is argued that not only is the well-being of the rural populations an issue, but the well-being of entire communities is under threat from the cumulative effects of policies that have sought to rationalise and centralise services. Attempts made by community members to sustain their communities are largely frustrated by external policy and other structural arrangements.
It is relevant to reflect on some of the ideas of Bauman (1998) who alerted attention to local societal features (including mobility) as both limiting and enabling as communal possibilities. The social construction of distance and freedom to move differentiates a global and extra-territorial elite from an ever more localised majority (Bauman 1998, p. 2). Individuals and families remaining in the localised communities bear the brunt of the problems and suffer anxieties and uncertainties, while those who move out (such as the young who move for education and those with marketable qualifications) experience the beneficial aspects of this change.

Other relevant theoretical concepts include what Beck (1999) refers to as a ‘second modernity’, in which social relations based on the territorial sense of communities linked with the nation-state have changed. He sees the collective pattern of life progress and controllability, full employment and the exploitation of nature, typical of ‘first modernity’, being undermined by five interconnected global processes: globalization, individualisation, gender revolution, underemployment and global risks (Beck 1999, p 2). Drawing on Albrow, (1996), and Eade, (1997), Beck’s analysis (1999, p. 16) conceptualises risk as a positive phenomenon. The communal sharing of risk, while not necessarily on a territorial basis, can be a (post-national) framework of reconstruction.

**Socio-demographic and policy context of the two communities**

Over the past two decades, in four out of every ten rural shires in Australia, the population has declined, despite an ever-increasing national population. In Yarriambiack, the shire in the Victorian Mallee ‘wheatbelt’ in which Hopetoun is located, the loss has been 23%. The adjoining shire has recorded a loss of 34%. Several larger regional centres have absorbed some of the population losses of smaller towns. New farming technology, with resulting aggregation of farms and worker redundancy, has been cited as the major reason for population decline (Mitchell 1999). Associated concern about the loss of services in rural and remote areas in Australia has led to consideration as to whether international human rights obligations are being breached by the government, in failing to provide basic services such as health and education (MacDonald 1999).

Researchers have noted that Australian rural residents (in a highly urbanised nation) suffer significant disadvantage (Cheers 1990; Lawrence and Share 1993; McLean 1998; Walmsley 1993). Rural dwellers overall have less of a sense of well-being than their urban counterparts. This is associated with lower average incomes, higher prices, limited job opportunities, scarcity of health services, child care and other support services and limited educational opportunities (Cheers 1990; James 1989; Healthsharing Women 1991).

In addition to the effects of the globalisation of agricultural markets and technical developments in agriculture, especially on rural youth employment, there is evidence to suggest that recent changes in public and private sector policies are compounding rural disadvantage. Significant among the policy changes have been: deregulation of the banking industry (resulting in the rationalisation of banking services in rural areas); amalgamations in local government which further reduce local employment opportunities; compulsory competitive tendering in local government; the introduction of casemix funding for health services (resulting in closure of some hospitals and reduction of the range of health services in other communities); regionalisation of government and privatised former government services; and closure of schools. Cumulatively, the problems that these policies and practices pose for the social sustainability of communities are widely recognised (e.g. Cribb 1987; Safe 1996; Healthsharing Women 1991; Jones & Tonts, 1995; Smailes 1995; Steinberg 1995; Walmsley 1993; Winkler 1998).

Cheers (1994, p. 131) sees rural people as generally disadvantaged relative to urban Australians with respect to life chances, material and social deprivation, poverty, income levels, prices, unemployment, housing quality, education expectations and attainment, and occupation opportunities and achievement. He notes that their total well being had recently taken ‘a severe battering’ and that ‘one-third of all teenage suicides in Australia occur in rural areas (and) rural youth suicide rates are far higher than...’
despite this dramatic evidence, no research until now has provided an analysis of the cumulative impacts of these changes on individual, family and community health and well-being in rural areas.

For most of this century, as Tomts and Jones point out (1997, p. 171), Australian governments' rural policies have been directed at providing a viable social and economic base for rural communities and country towns. Policies intended to provide the conditions for stable growth in agricultural economies, with equitable levels of access to services such as schools, hospitals and public housing were seen as instrumental in the development of stable rural communities. However, global economic restructuring, agricultural readjustment, farm amalgamation and rapid technological change have all contributed to the declining socio-economic viability of many rural areas including the case study communities. Continuing low commodity export prices are significant and the costs of domestic inputs into agriculture are rising.

Rural re-structuring means fundamental change in the economic basis of society, from which radical social change ensues (Gray 1994, p. 17). While discussion about rural re-structuring is often confused by apparent contradictions between long and short-term trends and different interpretations of economic statistics, there is little argument that the long-term economic trend for Australian agriculture has been one of declining returns and a decline in agriculture's share of the production of the Nation's wealth.

Structural adjustment for people in many rural communities means a life frequently characterised by: poorly performing local economies (being the product of drought, changing local and global markets, high interest rates and low commodity prices); declining employment opportunities; low and often inadequate household incomes; out-migration of youth; negative health outcomes associated with stress and low incomes; increasingly mobile populations; increasing isolation in instances where farm sizes increase to maintain viability; and reduced access to services resulting from rationalisation of services (Fitzgerald 1996, p. 42).

This pattern of decline has been compounded by state and federal government policies based on principles of neo-liberalism and privatisation with increasing government withdrawal from regional development strategies. The levels of public service provision have been rationalised and responsibility for community well-being has been devolved to the local level, at the same time as the local level is being stripped of its capacity to cope, lacking the necessary competence or skills to deal with the changes.

Within a broader sense of 'the social', there has been a relative neglect of aspects of human well-being, other than economic considerations (Chee 1995, p. 3). The separation of social and economic considerations is deeply embedded in our society and retards both economic and social development.

Research and policy literature on development strategies

Very few studies have been conducted that link structural analysis of rural decline and regeneration strategies with individuals' experiences. Some literature explores the probability of farmers being subsumed by the processes of international capitalism and in this section, recent studies are highlighted which focus on: the changing structure of rural communities; farmers' perceptions of change; ideas to reverse rural decline and revitalisation strategies; entrepreneurialism; capacity-building; and leadership issues.

It has been pointed out that farmers or farm people, as a group, do not pursue their own best interests, but are influenced by global agencies that dictate the conditions in which Australian agriculture is carried out (Gray et al. 1994; Gray 1991). Powerful agents maintain their own power by intentionally or unintentionally beguiling their subordinates such that they adopt the values of their superiors and ignore their own interests (e.g. Hindess 1976; Connell 1977). As Gray et al. (1995) point out, based on the insights of Lawrence and Vanclay (1994), farm people are finding that global agencies dictate the conditions in which Australian agriculture is being conducted. Farmers are being forced to further intensify production which continues and accelerates long-term processes of environmental degradation. Farming is subsumed by the interests of international capital directly, as corporate interests penetrate family farms, and indirectly, as farmers...
are placed on economic and technological treadmills. On the 'farm treadmill' farmers are forced to continually increase production at the same time as their returns decrease (Buttel et al. 1990 cited in Gray et al. 1995). Corporate farming is not making noticeable direct inroads into Australian agriculture. Family farms are just getting bigger.

However, the extent to which farmers are trapped into this continued subsumption through traditional individualism and collective lack of awareness on the one hand, or through acceptance of the treadmills and other factors (e.g. weather and market uncertainty) on the other, is an issue raised by Gray et al. (1994, p. 54). In either case, the continued subsumption limits options for the future of farming in Australia.

In response to the connected issue of sustained population decline in rural areas, some writers have noted that those policy approaches based on economic rather than social objectives may not provide solutions. To adequately address personal and community cost, communities themselves must be involved (e.g. McKenzie 1996).

Fitzgerald (1996, p. 42) confirms that ACOSS member-associations in rural and remote Australia are confronted with social consequences of unemployment and poverty in adversely affected regions, as well as reduction in access to locally-available community services. This occurs as governments seek to move to more 'rational' policy frameworks to optimise scarce resources. Social equity of economically-directed rural policy is a concern. Current regional development strategies may favour groups of people who are most able to integrate with economic and structural change over groups and areas which are already marginalised or becoming marginalised.

For example, structural changes may be based on philosophies or principles which ignore the interests of disadvantaged groups and may be detrimental to long-term viability of the community. They may promote regional (re)development within the context of a user pays approach. This approach can lead to a diminishing public provision of social and capital infrastructure and to increased targeting of services and service cuts without addressing the ability of low-income people and other disadvantaged people to manage. And overall, it may produce a 'devalued' sense of citizenship, in which economic imperatives dominate, and where social participation is a reflection of ability to pay for private sector-provided and commercialised services and information (Fitzgerald, 1996, pp. 42-43).

A strong community development approach is advocated in order that regional economies may re-structure in a way which is socially sustainable over the medium to longer term. This includes developing a capacity to monitor the policies and programs of federal, state and local government agencies in relation to private sector investment, as well as to provide assistance to government agencies to review policies and programs in relation to local and regional plans. Social sustainability is also dependent on communities working with the three levels of government agencies to improve co-ordination, efficiency and innovation in economic and social development, especially in disadvantaged areas (Fitzgerald 1996, p. 48).

In addition to government action, investment and incentives, Wildman et al. (1991, p. 59) see a local entrepreneurial or 'bottom up' approach as essential in order to maximise the number of initiatives which are actually implemented within revitalisation strategies for committed communities. Some overseas studies (e.g. in Finland) show strong village movements emerging with the aim of reversing rural decline, along with the protection of cultural identity and unhooking from dependence on and vulnerability to the global economy (see, e.g. Oksa 1992; Pietila 1997). Thake and Staubach (1993) show a number of initiatives and frameworks used in Europe by 'investing in people' for the regeneration of communities, however, the frameworks are mostly developed in urban settings. In the U.S.A., Barkley et al. (1991, p. 52) report that rural development strategies took on two new characteristics in the 1980s; one being an increasing focus on business generated by local entrepreneurs and the second, a great interest in high tech industries. However, those latter successes were usually in circumstances in which the small towns so benefiting were typically not too isolated from large urban areas or were in larger towns or near universities.

Obviously, initiative and leadership are key criteria for the success of local action. Gravell (1994)
cites a particular case study in Gippsland, Victoria, in which an issue of local concern (access to Raymond Island) became a clash between opposing values of conservatism and development held by different sectors in the community. Evidence accrued that an (economic) power elite did not totally hold sway within a local community, and Gravell also notes that economic rationalism while still resilient in Victoria shows signs of waning in strength as the dominant paradigm.

As well as capacity-building strategies, community leadership is an important contributor to local economic and social development. Sorensen and Epps (1996) explored leadership functions and personal attributes of leaders in Central Queensland towns and saw this topic receiving little attention to date in Australia.

The Victorian Farmers Federation has issued policy statements (August, 1999) including several aspects to improve rural health; notably, the use of non-population based funding for health education and service delivery. These statements also highlight the need for a major expansion in government investment in agricultural research, development and extension programs.

Two case studies

The aims of this empirical project were:

- To assess the impacts of policy change and associated levels of service provision on perceptions of individual, family and community health and well-being;
- And to identify the factors underlying any differences between communities in their perceptions of the impacts of the policy changes as well as record what developments were being undertaken.

Initially, the study developed out of personal conversations, interests and ideas. It was supported by Deakin University School of Health Sciences.

The research process was based on inclusion and widespread consultation, to enable all interested community members to express their views. There was a high level of interest in and commitment to the study by members of the chosen communities. Selection of the two communities in this study was based on Smailie’s view that ‘strongly defined communities of identity are centred around small country towns with ‘urban’ populations of roughly 500 to 1500 people’ (Smailie 1995, p. 145).

The study commenced in late 1998 continued throughout 1999, and was undertaken in two small rural communities, Hopetoun and Penshurst. These towns are of a similar size and geographic distance from Melbourne, the capital city of Victoria. The findings from both communities showed very similar trends.

Hopetoun is located four and a half hours by road transport from Melbourne and two and a half hours from the nearest regional city. It has a population of 670 people, 93 per cent of whom are Australian-born. Of this population, 81 per cent are aged 15 and over, and 28.5 per cent of the population are over 65 years of age. The unemployment rate is 4.4 per cent and 40 per cent of the population is not in the workforce (Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 1996).

Penshurst is located approximately three hours by road transport from Melbourne and half an hour from the nearest regional city and has a population of 503 people, with 86% being Australian born. Of this population, 78 per cent are aged 15 and over and more than a quarter of the population are over 65 years of age, with more than 15 per cent aged 75 and over. There is an unemployment rate of 3.8 per cent and 42 per cent of the population are not in the workforce (ABS 1996).

In both communities, key informant interviews were conducted with appropriate community representatives and stakeholders. Focus groups were also conducted with relevant groups such as young (teenage) residents, a parents’ group (in Hopetoun), and meetings were held with the local community development associations (Hopetoun Progress Association and Advance Penshurst). Over 80 people contributed to the study.

Findings of the case studies

The following section briefly summarises the residents’ perceptions of the impacts in farming, local government, public utilities, banking, health care and education. All of these factors are interconnected (see Hallebone, Townsend & Mahoney 2000a).
Changes in Farming

In both communities, changes in government subsidies, transport costs, droughts and sale of farms have caused relocation of farmers off the land and into the town. In Penshurst, changes in the floor-pricing of wool and a poor beef market have reduced the money coming into the community for reinvestment, with negative impacts on local businesses and employment.

Farms are becoming larger and people are needing to diversify their income bases. The decline in the viability of farms has also necessitated an increase in off-farm work. Results include the reduction in availability of volunteers for community services due to absence from the local community and/or the need for farm work to be done after hours; and the tendency to do business in the town near work. Together, these effects undermine the viability of businesses and voluntary organisations and make the communities less attractive places for other residents.

Merger of Shires

Centralisation of local government services away from the communities has caused the loss of thirty jobs in Hopetoun and seven in Penshurst with consequent losses of families, local businesses, voluntary contributions, and a higher load on remaining residents. Cascading impacts rebounded into support services with the downgrading of schools and banking facilities. Critical and significant losses were expressed, for example, a depletion of Shire offices (originally one in each town), loss of community identity and representation and a shift from feelings of self-satisfaction to feelings of apathy, despair and isolation.

Compulsory competitive tendering in local government has compounded this, with local businesses not necessarily winning tenders. A further loss of twenty jobs was expected in Penshurst from the result of council staff being forced to tender for their work.

Service provision impacts from local government mergers and CCT when still government policy) rebounded into the community. In Penshurst, the National Australia Bank branch closed soon after the amalgamation of shires, when over $1.5 million previously held by the branch was relocated to Hamilton, the administrative centre of the new Southern Grampians Shire. Penshurst residents perceive that the town has a low priority for funding within the new shire.

Similarly, in Hopetoun, impacts at the local government level had rebounded into support services. Feelings of despair included the ongoing threat to livelihoods of people still employed within the community by the Shire.

Downgrading of Public Utilities

Until recently, Hopetoun provided infrastructural support within the region for services such as water, electricity, natural resources and environment. With the rationalisation of these services, additional costs were experienced for water supply (to fill the local pool and artificial lake), transport of freight and people, as well as frequent disruptions to supply. Loss of a base of the State Government Department of Natural Resources and Environment had had a similar impact to the loss of local Shire offices. These changes have resulted in youth unemployment and lost training opportunities within the community.
Until the shire amalgamation, Penshurst had its own library and its own water board. Loss of these services has contributed to local job losses. While some residents welcome the new mobile library service, others consider it an unsatisfactory replacement for the community's own library. Similar views were expressed with regard to the downgrading of the ambulance service, and the privatised Post Office (though perceived as providing a good service) was seen as an example of the government's lack of commitment to providing services in rural areas.

**Deregulation of banks**

Downgrading of banks has meant additional loss of (bank staff) families to the community. Residents must now travel outside the community to discuss critical financial affairs with regional branches, leading to purchasing practices outside the community. There is a strong sense that people within the community are being dictated to by the banks on the nature of their banking, particularly through the nature of the services provided.

Another impact is the loss of 'wisdom' within the communities. This loss of bank staff coupled with the loss of significant other professionals and clergy within Hopetoun and Penshurst, means that the communities no longer have a pool of future elders, for example, probation officers or school councillors.

**Health care**

It was reported that health delivery services in the two towns were chiefly characterised by losses. Rationalisation of country health care provision has meant the merger of three hospitals within the region around Hopetoun to create one public hospital with emergency care facilities in the town. While very strong community involvement was required to secure the facility, in the face of various losses experienced by the residents of Hopetoun, it provides a sense of some future for the town. To residents, it also represents 'the only fight we've won'.

Relocation of Home and Community Care (HACC) services out of both communities to the nearest regional towns half to one hour away, means that support to elderly residents has moved to outside locations resulting in depersonalization and loss of local knowledge. Relocation of the HACC worker has caused loss of income to the towns and a trend towards reliance on trades and services outside the local communities. Dental and pharmaceutical services have largely been lost and controversies arisen about absolute availability of any medical doctors in the respective towns.

Changes over recent years in the funding arrangements for hospitals and health services in Penshurst have affected health care services. With the change to casemix funding, Penshurst Hospital experienced an increase in funding due to the categories of patient types it was serving. The move from 'Casemix' to 'Healthstreams' funding has provided greater flexibility in the use of funds, with money able to be shifted into the areas of greatest need. But while this creates a greater capacity to meet some of the community's health care needs (such as aged care and allied health services), this gain has been offset by a decline in acute care facilities.

Many concerns were expressed about the impacts of limited transport options, particularly on the ageing members of Hopetoun and Penshurst populations. Volunteer drivers provide transport for those who cannot get themselves to the larger towns for appointments, but for an ageing population this will become more and more problematic. As well, the amalgamation of local governments has seen the introduction of a 'user pays' policy for the local community bus services. Ambulance services have been reduced dramatically and the timing of bus services do not allow flexibility for residents to attend specialist appointments.

**Education**

Downgrading of the Hopetoun secondary school due to declining population has meant reduction of overall staff numbers and has also led to less effective rotation of teaching staff. Loss of families has meant a shift in demographic profile of the community and fewer young people staying in the local community for their secondary education. Once young people leave the community they do not return because there are no employment prospects. This is not popular with young residents, many of whom appreciate the quality of life that Hopetoun (or Penshurst) offers and would prefer the chance to settle in the town after they leave school.

Country schools need to provide pastoral care for students.
Increasing suicide rates amongst rural youth mean that there is extra pressure for resources. Hopetoun Secondary College has responded to this pressure by appointing a part-time chaplain to the school staff.

Changes to funding policy for pre-school education provision means that fund raising is now a requirement to provide for staff salaries rather than an option. This is problematic in the context of low income and lack of permanency of jobs for families, yet the need to provide more and more for the education of one’s children.

Residents’ perceptions

It was perceived that in terms of the capacity to engage in community development, residents’ perceptions of the cumulative impacts of all these recent changes could be divided into four groups:

- The ‘optimists’, with a vision for the future, actively working towards the long term viability of their town. These appeared to be a minority;
- The ‘pessimists’ who believe that the town is doomed and that they are simply the next level to become a ghost town, or at best, has a future which is precarious;
- The ‘apathetic’ who seemed not to care or did not care;
- The ‘disenfranchised’ who are not seen to belong to the respective community and are therefore operating outside discussions about the future.

While individual perceptions of the health and well-being of the communities were obviously influenced by a given resident’s individual stance or position, the sense of powerlessness against outside threats was very strongly articulated by every group.

Community development strategies

Hopetoun Progress Association and Advance Penshurst are planning and promoting various socio-economic and community development strategies. Community development is understood as being a process of involving people who live in a defined geographical locality, or who share common interests, in collective action to improve their well-being (Baum et al., 1992). Among those residents in the two towns, those who tend to be ‘optimists’ see tourism as the best opportunity for various forms of development, given that both towns are on the route to National Parks.

Hopetoun has built a picturesque lake and recent successful grant applications have supported the construction of facilities within a ‘creative village’ concept. Without doubt, this success has given the residents the feeling that something positive is happening. Concern is expressed about appropriate signage and the importance of Hopetoun controlling its own image rather than being dictated to by slow-moving external agencies. Access to the National Park is also crucial from a tourism perspective, especially the provision of an airstrip. It is also seen as advantageous from an emergency health care perspective.

Penshurst being on the main route between the coast and the Grampians was viewed as positive. So were local features such as: Kolor historical home; the German settlement of the area and the associated cultural features (music, cuisine); the volcanic crater (Mt. Rouse); the wetlands development in the town; and historical events such as the town’s nineteenth century bank robbery (which provided the focus for a recent re-enactment pageant). There was a general view that, if the town could capitalise on these features, its future might be brighter.

However, the attitude of Southern Grampians Shire Council was seen as unhelpful in this regard, with poor signage of Penshurst and its attractions in the local area. For example, the sign, a few kilometres out of Penshurst on the main road from the coast does not mention Penshurst, but lists Hamilton and Dunkeld. Similarly, in Penshurst township, it was only through vigorous lobbying by Advance Penshurst, that the distances to the Grampians via Dunkeld and via Hamilton were noted on the sign. Without those distances, tourists often chose the route via Hamilton, thereby missing the main street of Penshurst, with a consequent loss of passing trade for the town.

There was a strong perception amongst Penshurst residents of a tendency by Hamilton to try to ‘grab’ the tourism opportunities which more appropriately would reside with Penshurst. For example, though Hamilton does not have a volcano, it is pushing for the proposed ‘Volcano Trail Interpretive Centre’ to be located at Hamilton. With the old shire offices available at Penshurst, and the town being located at the foot of Mt. Rouse (an extinct volcano),

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Penhurst appears to be the obvious location for such a centre. Residents (not surprisingly) are angered by what they see as poaching of their assets by Hamilton.

In Penhurst, the availability of the former Shire Offices and other buildings suitable for tourist purposes, wide roads, pleasant tree-lined streets, plentiful housing at reasonable prices, the natural spring (recently uncovered), and the general friendliness of the people are assets which Penhurst can utilise as a basis for future development. In addition, with people who have recently lost their jobs as a result of the structural changes, and with new people moving into the town to take up housing opportunities, there is or potentially will be a pool of people with a variety of skills which can be used to develop new enterprises.

In Hopetoun the creation and success of Gateway Business Employment Education Training (BEET) is seen as very important to the community. Gateway BEET's sating in the old Shire (Karkaroo) Offices is important in re-establishing that critical focus for the community. Local perceptions of what Gateway BEET is contributing to the community are very positive. An opportunity (perceived during the beginning of the research process) to appoint a Chief Executive Officer was seen as important, especially in the context of previous concerns about lack of a professional base within the community.

Support for Gateway BEET was indicated by responses such as the following:

'It will be the voice of the community.'

'Gateway BEET has been a real plus from the shire. It forced the community to be involved and people realise that they are working with people who care. The shire offices in Warrack(nabeal) couldn't care less.'

One example of the activities of Gateway BEET was the seeking of funds for a new roof for the Town Hall. Prior to this a Hall Committee had unsuccessfully sought funds for a new roof for a number of years. It was noted that Gateway BEET had been able and willing to give advice on alternative funding sources within its early days of operation, and respondents expressed strong criticism of the lack of initiative at (new) shire level to offer this sort of wisdom to the community.

Another new development in Hopetoun was the planned location of a mobile telephone tower near the town which was seen as being vital to the long-term viability of the town. This will enable travelling business and other personnel in the town to stay in Hopetoun overnight and still communicate with their organisations.

Perceived barriers to community development strategies

While the need and opportunities for community development strategies to be implemented in the case study communities is obvious, the current profiles of the communities indicate that there are a number of factors which impede such strategies. These reflect similar concerns to those found in the literature, and include: population size and profile; economic resource base; lack of cultural congruence; loss of leadership capacity; declining accessibility of information; and inappropriate government structures/requirements.

1. Population size and profile

Due to declining populations within the two case study communities, there are fewer individuals available to undertake community development strategies. As well, the age profile of both communities indicates that they have fewer young adult to middle-aged residents (between 24 and 65) and more residents in the over 65 age group than either Victoria as a whole or Australia. While community development strategies will obviously need to involve all age groups, the higher than average elderly populations in these communities suggests that there may be a shortage of those with the energy to initiate and sustain such strategies.

2. Economic resource base

The economic resource base of these communities is declining, with a reduction over recent years in the number of businesses, the number of jobs and the average income. With Government policies over recent years resulting in an increasing need for communities to undertake local fundraising in order to sustain community services and facilities, the capacity and the willingness of residents to dip further into their financial or 'in-kind' resources in order to undertake or sustain community development strategies has been compromised.
3. Lack of internal cultural congruence

Local government mergers have caused some ‘crossing of cultures’, resulting to some extent in a lack of cultural congruence between these communities and their new local government bodies. In both communities, this has led to a perception by residents that their towns’ development opportunities are being ‘poached’ by the large towns at the centre of their new shires. Within the communities, there is also a growing lack of cultural congruence, with the increasing number of vacant residential properties being sold or rented to people moving from the cities in search of cheap accommodation. These people are often not aware of the need for community involvement in sustaining rural towns, and this can result in misunderstandings between new residents and those of long standing.

4. Loss of leadership capacity

With farm aggregation, loss of banks and local government offices, loss of businesses, and the resultant declining employment opportunities, young people are moving away from these communities to study and are not returning. Similarly, those young families who previously would have moved to the area because of jobs in banks, schools, shire offices, government departments and the like are not doing so. This has resulted in a loss of leadership capacity in communities, as these people (who tended to be those with educational qualifications or other training) are not available to share their skills.

5. Declining accessibility of information

Despite the perception of living in an information age, where information is more readily available than ever before, these communities are finding that information is only selectively available. Familiarity with technology is an essential component in being able to access information, and this is less readily available in these small communities than in larger centres. Moreover, the regionalisation of government departments, and the privatisation of many former government services, has further limited access to relevant information. One example given was the trend for information relevant to agriculture, once received from a large Department of Agriculture, being selectively distributed through private agribusinesses. For successful community development, information about potential strategies and funding sources are essential.

6. Inappropriate government structures or requirements

Lack of continuity of government structures, policies and procedures contribute to the difficulties faced by small communities in undertaking community development, with community members feeling that they are being asked to reinvent the wheel each time they seek help. The human leadership capacity of these communities, already stretched because of the declining populations and diminishing economic base, is further undermined by having to deal with a plethora of government departments and regional structures, with no capacity for integration and information sharing. This is complicated further by differing timelines and requirements for grant applications, and accountability procedures which are often onerous. Small communities, which lack access to or understanding of information about the necessary procedures because of their existing disadvantage, are in a ‘Catch 22’ situation; they cannot access the grants/support because they do not have the knowledge or skills, and because they have not been able to access grants they have not had the opportunities to develop knowledge or skills.

Conclusion

Community development initiatives in these two rural areas are highly frustrated not only by external neglect but by disintegrated policies and sources of assistance. Experiences within these communities (which may be similar to many others across Australia) show not only that strategies need to be put in place to assist them enhance community sense of well-being and survival but to be successful they need to be realistic.

There is little evidence of recognition in policy frameworks of issues of long-term sustainability for rural communities. To the extent that the trends of the agricultural industries, new technology, reduction of the welfare state and privatisation tend to lead to a loss of community identity and increase in individualism, the chances to build local initiatives to deal with change are diminished.

However, as Beck (1999) points out, focusing on risk in society and
its possible positive connotations has drawn attention to a possible framework for future reconstruc-
tion of communities. For example, in proposing a trial of the Nebraska model of community revitalisation
to be applied to a Victorian town (Yarram) Worrall (1999, p. 3) points
to the need for new strategies for
developing and maintaining a pro-
gram of change management. Four
basic elements are required: an
appropriate model of change; a
strategy; suitable leadership; and
a community committed to
triailling the model.

In the context of globalising
capitalism and a national rural
policy vacuum, the survival of
communities such as Hopetoun
and Penshurst will probably de-
pend almost entirely on the initiati-
tives of new local industries and
the residents’ construction of so-
cial capital. For both types of ini-
tiative, in an era of the accelerating
individualism nurtured by
globalisation, great personal and
group energy will be required.

The very existence of small ru-
ral communities is crucial to the
sustainability of Australia, eco-
nomically, socially and bio-physi-
cally. It is to this end that method-
ologies which promote interaction
and linkages between policies, leg-
islation, education, partnership
and advocacy arrangements must
be encouraged (Labonte 1993). As
Onyx (1997, p. 2) has pointed out,
future research is required within
an action framework to focus on
community possibilities of develop-
ing social capital such as forms of
mutual participation in collect-
ive self management.

As Gray et al. (1994) have noted,
the issues of empowerment and
and equity need to be considered within
society relative to integrating eco-
nomic, social and physical impera-
tives, and to cater both for those
individuals who have access to re-
sources and those who do not. At
present, not much is known about
farmers’ perceptions, for example,
whether they view reflexively their
situation within global capitalism
or see the new productivity de-
mands, like weather and the mar-
ket, as being part and parcel of
agricultural life (Gray et al. 1994).
This converges with Beck’s con-
temporary gathering of views of
communities at risk being poten-
tial bases of political action and
collectively binding decision-making
in a ‘second modernity’ (Beck
1999, p. 16). For this to become a
greater possibility, recognition
should be given to what has been
lost (and gained) in rural commu-
nities. Research information on the
impacts of change should be made
available to community groups,
together with globally-based
knowledge of possible develop-
ment strategies. This must include
potential barriers to community development and how those
barriers can be broken.

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