

Introduction

Renewing Country Towns

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Much has changed since 2000, when the first national conference on The Future of Australia's Country Towns heard a great deal about the decline of the bush, and many appeals against the callousness of governments. Academic studies of towns tended to be historical explorations of why they had failed or succeeded. Local attitudes were often expressed by the Australian farmer's traditional lament: "Government, why hast thou forsaken us?" Farming was apparently central: the future of the bush, if not of Sydney, would be a reflection of increasingly globalised agri-business.

Today the very varied circumstances of towns are better understood, non-government initiatives increasingly prevalent, and (some) governments more sensibly attentive. Growth, stasis and decline are not just employment-driven, nor is all employment agricultural. Tourists, retirees, life-style or cheap rent seekers may all increase populations, and demand new or expanded services. Rural towns aren't all alike: "sponge" cities draw on smaller communities; peri-urban towns draw on the metropolis; coastal and mountain towns, and a few classic mining towns, attract both tourists and new residents; wheatbelt and whistlestop places still decline as they've been doing since the advent of the automobile, not to mention the shopping mall.

The most interesting and encouraging trend of recent years is toward many different kinds of self-help and mutual aid. Towns are identifying their problems, articulating their intentions, and finding ways to solve and achieve them. Our authors use the term "social capital" in various ways, but the basic phenomenon is always recognisable: human relationships are explored and reinforced; networks are tested, renewed and extended; trust is developed; information and expertise are sought and found within and beyond the town; influence is wielded; things get done.

A lot is known about country towns: what's happening to them, what can be done. In the first chapter, Reimer brings a Canadian perspective to these

experiences of rural communities, reflects on Australian examples discussed by other contributors to this volume and sets the agenda for the rest of the book.

An increasing number and variety of people care intelligently: public servants, politicians and academics; but more importantly more and more people are concerned about their towns. Academics, a category that includes most of this book's authors, can contribute by combining scholarly rigour, practical experience and straightforward writing. Accounts in plain language of what actually happens, why and what it means communicate best. That's what we've tried to provide.

The ideas and actions described in this book are those of academics and inhabitants of country towns (sometimes the same people) often working closely together. They reflect our growing understanding of the realities, sometimes harsh, frequently hopeful, of non-metropolitan Australia. The book covers 5 themes: people and the changing social and economic trends as drivers of rural and regional development; the art of engaging people in their own development; new modes of development - re-seeing the old and making it new again; water and its management at the community level; and the planning processes and frameworks including a detailed look at Australian local government and the New Rural Economy program in Canada.

People and the Changing Socio/Economic Trends

Statistics sometime conceal human realities; people in all their diversity are turned into averages. But thoughtful studies can also portray the complexity of the real world. Population dynamics reveal that the bush as an homogenous grouping of communities doesn't exist; there are many ruralities, flourishing and declining. Murphy argues that trends of decline have now 'bottomed out'. Agriculture has rationalised; old mines have closed; local governments have amalgamated; metro and big town chain stores done their worst; branch banks and hospitals closed. Many towns may now be experiencing stability at decreased levels of population and service. Budge explores ideas of a new regional divide. Rather than Melbourne or the bush, the new dichotomy may be metro-Melbourne (to 150 Kms out), metro-Bendigo, Warrnambool, Albury-Wodonga, or the remaining bush! While lower real estate and living costs attract former urbanites, non-economic considerations of life-style, scenery and amenities are very important. Small towns near regional centres are providing much of the 'quality of life' sought by increasing numbers. In many cases regional centres have become dependant on their surrounding small towns to provide the attractive places to live and invest. Choice of place

is newly decoupled from pre-existing employment: many can work from home or manage a long commute; others take service jobs which are created by population growth, by populations with high demand for educational, cultural, recreational and other services. Budge argues that a new regional divide is emerging between those towns and rural areas within the sphere of growth centres and those outside. Governments must understand this new divide and distinguish among places and regions.

The Art of Engaging People

All involved in small town development recognize the importance of fostering broad-based, meaningful and sustained engagement of people in recreating a positive future. Over the past few years country towns have been busily identifying, mobilizing and enhancing their assets. Social and cultural capital are increasingly recognized and used to great effect. The processes can be furthered by collaboration with 'outsiders' who put their artistic, scientific, sociological, academic ideas and training at the disposal of communities that can use them. Partnerships can work to substantial mutual benefit, yet there are hurdles to be overcome. Rogers and Brockley discuss the challenges of establishing an effective working relationship between university researchers and communities, presenting two case studies where the outcomes of collaboration exceeded everyone's expectations. *Small Towns: Big Picture* and *Scats, Bats and Bridges* involved local artists, researchers, schools and local community members to produce a coherent and shared understanding of sustainability issues and opportunities. Both projects enhanced mutual learning and collaboration between community organizations and a university, enriching research, and strengthening the problem solving capacity of the communities involved.

Sheil and Smith also write about the links between regionally located researchers and the engagement of local people in establishing effective community-based development strategies. Sheil and Smith present the work of Monash University, Gippsland in training and resourcing regional workers who contribute their knowledge of localities and issues to shape relevant regional policy. The program recruits students from such diverse sectors as local government, environmental groups, indigenous people, women's organisations, etc., from across the region, and equips them with the theory and practice necessary for collaborative engagement - where they are making a difference in their own communities.

New Modes of Development — new ways of seeing the old and making it new again.

The need to create new futures for many small communities has stimulated new approaches to community development on a number of fronts. More people are becoming involved, new people are arriving and contributing to the process, new ideas are increasingly welcomed and input from outside communities is increasingly sought. The diversity of responses and outcomes is vast. Here we present several examples of how new ways of thinking are re-seeing the old and making it new again.

An exciting project undertaken by urban design students at Melbourne's RMIT in collaboration with the communities of Jeparit (pop. 371) and Rainbow (pop. 529) located in the Wimmera-Mallee region of Northwestern Victoria, analysed the current landscape and built environment of these towns, with a view to rethinking their urban design options. The relative sparsity of physical occupation in these towns creates an opportunity for direct curatorial action. To better meet the needs of local people, different, rather than more and more closely packed facilities, are required. Bertram and Neustupny present the options developed through a collaborative and engaging design analysis process.

Tragedy can often be the catalyst for change. Johnson tells us about the back-packer fire in Childers and how the town has responded, providing tremendous insights into community and the emergence of a new future.

Teghe and McAllister tell us about the way Anakie, a Central Queensland sapphire mining community, has reinvented itself in the context of drastic changes in its economic circumstances. It has capitalised on its cultural capital: the traditions of the small-scale sapphire miner. Previously supporting small mining enterprises consisting of individuals or groups of hand miners and jewellery-making artisans, the community saw an upsurge of capital-intensive mining in the 1970s and 80s which depleted its sapphire deposits, produced large-scale unemployment and contributed to a decline in the well-being of the community in other ways. However, the community is recovering due to the growth of tourism-based enterprises that offer visitors a varied experience of small-scale prospecting and mining.

In Tasmania, perhaps best known for its astounding natural beauty, more so than ever, it is its people that are forging new stories and identities. It is a place of difference, where distinctive values, landscapes, agriculture, climates, wildlife, cultural heritage and communities of artists converge. Having left

behind a history of poor economic performance and out-migration, Tasmania is gaining a reputation for its incredible richness and innovativeness.

Gralton and Vanclay talk about an exciting development in the production of 'quality' food, set within this turnaround, and which offers considerable opportunities to the small town and associated communities. Such developments have promoted diversity; thereby resisting the homogenizing effects of globalisation and aligning with a philosophy of development that is more conducive to sustainable and healthy small towns.

Still focusing on food production, Mares alerts us to the increasing difficulties of horticultural producers around Australia in securing a reliable supply of labour, particularly for high-value crops that require sensitive handling and are not amenable to mechanised harvesting. A proposed solution is a seasonal employment scheme to bring workers from the Asia-Pacific region to fill short-term gaps in the local labour market. There is strong support for such a scheme from growers and from governments in the Asia-Pacific region, but the idea faces entrenched political and bureaucratic resistance in Australia. Mares presents and discusses the significant potential benefits and pitfalls of employing migrant labour on a seasonal basis. Drawing on the Canadian experience, seasonal workers are considered to have a revitalising effect on regional towns through their spending patterns and service needs (e.g. shops, banks), in addition to the social contribution that migrant workers' can make to small town communities.

Water and its Management

Water is obviously vital everywhere, and especially precious on the driest continent. But only periodically since Goyder drew his line in the 1860s have Australians grasped that scarcity, often mislabelled as drought, is the normal condition of much of Australia, including country towns. Understanding and sophistication are increasing; when a water crisis hits the headlines, articles discuss infrastructure costs, sensible pricing policies, techniques to reduce consumption and reuse of 'gray' water, etc. ("States cut spending on water", *The Australian*, Wednesday June 15 2005.)

Many small towns in Australia have fragile water supplies, and have suffered extensive water restrictions affecting quality of life, inward investment and sometimes town viability. The small size of these towns, and an often outdated water and waste water system, increase their vulnerability to water shortages, while investment costs on the supply side can be high in the absence of scale economies.

Increasingly, communities and water authorities are examining demand side solutions to water shortages. McRae-Williams and Lowe discuss how demand management can be used to achieve more sustainable solutions at relatively low cost. Being strong and close, small town communities can be more effective in achieving lower water usage per capita than larger communities. They argue that demand management strategies implemented by small rural communities across Australia could save billions of dollars and enhance long term sustainability.

In addition to water shortages, many communities have long lived with poor water quality and inadequate waste water treatment. Communities increasingly expect water and waste water quality to be improved - for both human and environmental health reasons. However, the cost, effectiveness, and acceptability of different technologies and approaches to water and waste water management are issues which need to be addressed in light of local people's views and preferences. While State governments have embarked on a range of water reforms, little is known of the views and preferences of small rural communities regarding the types of services recommended as part of these reforms. Cooper, Crase and Dollery report on a study aimed at identifying preferred technologies, and the capacity and willingness of small rural communities to pay for them.

Plans, Policies and Practices

In the past, plans and policies tended to be things done to rural Australia, ostensibly for it, but not by it. Now the many rural, non-metropolitan Australians are increasingly planning and acting for themselves, and seeking, sometimes successfully, to influence governments. Towns draw upon the resources of banks and the theories of business schools to mobilize and organize their resources; work with professionals to redesign environments to meet their current and future needs; use the tools of social science and computing to identify their assets and liabilities, and make their case for policy development.

Here deVrieze of the Bendigo Bank discusses the philosophical and practical elements of successful business networks organized for mutual benefit. He points out that in a rural/regional context all the limited capital(s) must be harnessed. Too often businesses do not know the capability and capacity of the region, let alone its neighbours. Inclusiveness is the key to an effective business network, bringing together the silos of government, health care, education, not for profits, employees, firms, and youth. An effective network/ com-

munity knows and showcases local product, produce and services and the human resources that go into creating them. A successful business network encourages new ideas and initiatives, and increases local sales, production and employment. It can reverse the trend toward importing product and exporting jobs. It is a model of community engagement, creating opportunities for social as well as economic benefit.

This idea of community capacity has emerged in recent times as a key factor in small town survival and is widely believed to be positively related to economic and social development and the well-being of communities. How we measure and monitor community capacity and take strategic action to build capacity where it is needed, is an essential plank in small town development. Cheers *et al.* have developed a computer-based template initially intended as a tool to audit a community's capacity to support primary industry growth - and is now being modified to measure community capacity more generally. This chapter includes examples of community capacity profiles, recommendations for further template development, ideas about how it might be applied in community and regional development, and implications for community capacity theory and research.

For small towns the way local government responds to its needs is often crucial - with a growing call by communities and other levels of government for greater community engagement. Martin provides important insights into the current legislative mix which inhibits local government from being the best it can be for its local community.

The final chapter by Reimer and Bollman reports on a highly successful approach to rural planning and development developed in the Canadian context. The striking similarities between the Australian and Canadian experience suggests there is much we can learn from each other.