

Bridging the Gap – Strategies for renewal in Rural and Remote Communities

Introduction

Rural and Remote communities Australia wide, are facing their greatest challenge since the great depression of the 1930s.

The advent of globalisation and the removal of tariff protection in the late 1980s' have required Australian industry to rethink their strategies towards economic diversity, productivity and viability. No longer can Australia linger in the 'hazy days' of the 1950s, 1960s, 1970s, where virtually the only industry was primary production and We as Australians, accepted readily the lifestyle of 'living off the sheep's back'.

With live sheep and beef exports in the 1980s and with the imposition of a wool stockpile, Australias' standing within the world primary production market is diminishing. This is particularly evident in the sheep industry whereupon the cost of production outweighs the benefits or profits obtained from this market. As such, many graziers are currently opting out of the sheep industry to the beef industry, which is currently experiencing a growth through expanded world markets. However, as more and more graziers opt for this market it too will become 'saturated' and diminished profits from over supply will eventuate.

Today's economy therefore must rely heavily upon a revitalised manufacturing industry, the further development of natural resources eg. minerals, oil and gas supplies, the further advancement of technology and chemistry, coupled with improved tourism opportunities.

Most of these developments have been established in regional or metropolitan Australia based purely on efficiency and production cost benefits.

As such, rural and remote Australia has been experiencing an economic decline over the last decade, which has seen a huge population decrease and the removal of support services including government facilities, banks etc to these areas.

The introduction of the Hilmer Report in the 1980s and the implementation of the National Competition policy, places further burden on rural and remote communities to ensure that they too, compete openly with other local authorities and private enterprise in the delivery of services, while still trying to redress a diminishing local economy.

The challenge therefore, for rural and isolated communities, is to galvanise our communities to at least sustain current population. To seek new and /or alternative markets, industry, to establish tourism potential where appropriate, and to explore other avenues for economic development or niche enterprises.

Social Exclusion in Rural and Remote Communities

Social exclusion is experienced in rural and remote communities through the following: -

- **Population drift**
- **depressed local economy**
- **small population base**

➤ **lack of employment opportunities**

➤ **Market failure**

In rural and remote towns, local Councils and Community Organisations are very concerned at the decline of their towns.

This decline has not only been in their economic wealth but also the employment prospects and the associated population drift – especially for their young people.

This population has also included the towns' senior citizens that have been forced to move to larger cities because of a complete lack of suitable housing. As the decline in country towns has occurred the standard of housing has also declined significantly because of the ever – increasing disparity between the cost of construction and the resale (market) value of the house.

The need for housing

Given the market failure in country towns, the aging stock and the growing disparity between the cost of new housing and the actual market value, the provision of good standard appropriate accommodation is a difficult problem.

The effects of the lack of suitable and appropriate housing are: -

- **A drift by people to bigger population centres**
- **With senior citizens they are forced to move to appropriate housing in larger regional centres**
- **An inability by employees to employ additional staff because of a lack of housing**

In the small country towns there are few, if any, Community Organisations that are interested and well enough resourced to apply for, and manage, community housing. This leaves Councils faced with the decision to stand by and watch the continuing decline of their towns or become involved in the provision of suitable housing.

While public housing may be seen as the solution to the above, public housing design guidelines have not catered for local conditions (eg. need for extended eaves, air conditioning etc) and management being instigated from centres over 700 kms away, leave periods of long vacancies and problems with abandonment and damage to property.

In the past provision of housing had been instituted on a purely cost effectiveness basis and until recently (the last 3-5 years) was mainly accented towards regional and metropolitan areas.

Recently this position has changed to provide housing more on a needs basis and to provide housing which is appropriate to meet the identified need.

Formation of a Regional Steering Committee and Elsewhere Housing Group

In 1991, four shires based in the south- west Queensland region formed what is known today as the Elsewhere Housing Group. (The name elsewhere, came from the weather person on the TV when detailing the weather would address the Darling Downs and Elsewhere region. No doubt we are the elsewhere region.)

This group meets every three months and is attached to a similar meeting held in the south-west region also known as the SWRED (South West Regional Economic Development Board).

This organisation has further developed to include another three shires, and is now known as the western region.

An eastern region has recently been established incorporating a further six local authority regions, which meets three times per year.

The South West Regional Steering Committee consists of representatives from each regional group (east/west) and meets approximately twice per year.

This reference group has been very successful in promoting issues of common concern to Government and Departmental personnel as well as a lobbying mechanism.

Some notable successes of this Reference Group are as follows: -

- **Implementation of a \$50M Rural and Regional Funding Program through Community Housing Division (\$7.8M was allocated to the SW Region)**
- **A standardised Funding Agreement for Local Authorities (Deleting the need for Mortgages)**
- **Improved residential design guidelines incorporating regional recommendations.**

Government responses

The State Minister in line with the Community Housing Division (now known as Housing Queensland) has assisted this organisation through the provision of funding to employ a Community Housing Resource Worker.

The role of this person is to assist organisations with the implementation of their projects, to act as liaison from the community sector to the Department, and to assist organisations with policy development and organisational management if required.

Conclusion

Rural and remote communities do face an uphill task. They are faced with the need to sustain their populations while at the same time seek opportunities for renewed business activity.

Our community is looking at a niche market in OBE Beef (Organic Beef Exports) and additional tourism potential with the Cooper Creek. (You may have been aware of the “Keep your Cotton Picking Hands Off the Cooper” campaign) which was very successful. It will be up to each region to establish and develop these new alternatives.

Governments must support and promote (assist with funding) these alternatives, and to provide infrastructure that will enable country towns to prosper and regenerate. If country Australia does disappear the burden placed on regional and metropolitan Australia will be enormous in terms of increased infrastructure (ie, water, sewerage, roads and of course housing).

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