



Fact Sheet 17

Sustainable small communities

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Small rural and remote communities make important contributions to Australia's economy, culture, outback environment and national security. Ensuring sustainability of these communities and equitable services for their populations are important ongoing challenges.

About 3 per cent of Australia's total population live in areas characterised as remote or very remote. This is about 650,000 people – the equivalent of the combined populations of Darwin, Hobart, Townsville, Toowoomba and Bendigo.

Given the critical mass required for the provision of certain services, and the results likely to be delivered to small populations by an unfettered market, one of Australia's current challenges is how to deal with communities that are quite small and/or quite isolated. Compounding the urgent need for local and affordable services is the fact that more than half the areas classified as Very Remote are in the bottom quarter of socio-economic areas in Australia.

Sustainability and change

"Sustainability and change go hand in hand. If the benchmark is the status quo, sustainability is unattainable. There is no possibility that rural landscapes can be preserved in something like their current forms, and in many respects, neither should they be (for example, because of wasteful patterns of resource use). It will not be possible to secure a future for every small town, the demography of rural Australia will change, some rural settlements will thrive and grow, new agricultural products will be produced, there will be a shift towards more consumption of rural amenity, some natural environments will be irreversibly degraded while others will be restored, values and cultures will change.

The challenge to policy-makers, private capital and rural communities will be to steer a path through the inexorable forces of change in a direction that can be judged, widely, as a progression towards sustainability.

There can be no doubt that achieving change in support of rural sustainability will require a great deal of effort, as well as openness to ruralities that are quite different from those we are familiar with."

Cocklin and Alston (2005)

What is sustainability?

A common theme of reports and submissions on the subject of sustainability is the need for long term plans and policies. For example, in September 2008 an Expert Social Panel looking at the impact of drought argued that:

" - governments and non-government organisations must move away from crisis-framed responses to dryness and adopt more long-term sustainable approaches to the delivery of existing human support

services in rural communities. A longer-term approach would allow human support services to focus on early intervention and the ongoing wellbeing of farm families, rural businesses and communities".

There is no clear understanding of what a sustainable rural community is. The term 'sustainable' often connotes the situation in which, even in the absence of intervention and support, the place or business will not decline in the foreseeable future. For some people, a sustainable community might be defined as one with a viable primary school, pub, general store, some social, artistic and sporting capacity, and community organisations such as CWA, Rotary and/or Lions. For others, proximity to a doctor and emergency healthcare may well be essential.

However, some people may not mind living in places that are very small – and even experiencing population loss – as long as they have access to certain basic services.

The underlying principle is that people should have a fair go wherever they live.

In 2001 the Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics (ABARE) suggested that sustainable towns fall into three broad categories:



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- those with high employment and low amenity, such as some remote mining towns where wages are high but living conditions poor;
- those with medium employment and reasonable amenity, such as the larger inland towns with a range of industries, good service and cheaper housing than the major cities; and
- those with low employment and good amenity such as the coastal areas that have attracted many retirees.

The question for the nation and its governments is what can and should be done about places that lack both employment and amenity, particularly if they are in an area now facing major changes related to the environment.

Determining sustainability

People are entitled to ask whether government support through such things as research and development for 'adaptation to change' and productivity gains is close enough to the people who actually live in small communities and remote areas. If it is not, it is likely that the people affected are missing out on a reasonable lifestyle. The 'trickle down' effect from national research priorities to the families and businesses in small country towns is notoriously slow and uncertain.

There is particular concern at the suggestion that governments should consider assessing the longer term viability of remote communities in economic terms only, without a fair assessment of other costs and benefits to the residents, to local industry and environment, or to the nation. This is especially troubling if this would mean that those places deemed unsustainable would be 'written off'.

These communities provide healthier homes for many Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people than the regional centres to which they would otherwise have to move, and house many of the country's much vaunted cultural, ecological and tourism assets.

Substantial economic, cultural and social losses would result if remote communities were simply cast adrift through cessation of vital services that should be accessible by all Australians.

Ensuring equity

Despite their hands-off approach overall, governments still sometimes provide adjustment assistance in circumstances where communities are adversely affected by government decisions, such as the creation of a national park or the removal of tariff protection. The immediate future will see governments presented with good cases for such compensation as a result of

the reduced availability of water for irrigation and town supplies in the Murray-Darling Basin, for example. Government purchases of irrigation water entitlements should help support river flows and provide water for some towns and cities, but will reduce the level of economic activity and employment in some regions.

Climate change and policies to reduce it and to mitigate its effects will further disrupt existing commercial and settlement patterns and lead to calls for government support.

Equity depends in part on access to the services provided by state, local and federal agencies. The Australian Government's responsibilities include communications, general practice, aged care, tertiary education and a number of targeted rural programs.

Components of a sustainability strategy

Given the wide and differing range of circumstances facing rural and remote communities, there is no simple solution to the sustainability issue. However, a successful strategy should include four main components:

1. evaluation of the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing particular communities or types of community;
2. assessment of the infrastructure situation in relation to communications, health, transport, education and community facilities, ideally compared to some agreed benchmarks;
3. ensuring active local community participation in the planning and decision processes; and
4. understanding and empathy with the intrinsic value of small remote communities to Australia's cultural, social and economic life.

One of the key challenges will be to engage the private sector, all levels of government and the various statutory bodies and other organisations involved in the evaluations and investments required. Current broadband initiatives must ensure that people, businesses and homes in smaller and more remote communities have the same access as those in the major cities. The technical means exist to make this a reality, and much of the social, commercial and health future for smaller communities depends on its attainment.

Community sustainability (however defined) is closely related to the health and wellbeing of the citizens. For this reason, health advocates will continue to call for governments to bear their share of the responsibility for the policies and programs that are not related directly to personal health status but which influence the vitality and liveability of small rural and remote communities.