

**‘RURAL
REVITALISATION AND
THE NEED TO CREATE
SUSTAINABLE,
HEALTHY AND
RESILIENT
COMMUNITIES’**

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A. PREAMBLE

I am unashamedly parochial and passionate about the importance of rural and regional Australia and its myriad of small communities. This passion and belief is based upon –

- Quality of life – numerous studies and surveys show that country people experience far greater satisfaction and happiness than their urban counterparts in terms of marital happiness, family functioning, spouse appreciation, personal safety and community involvement and support.
- Source of so much of our heritage (both indigenous and non-indigenous) and national identity.
- Economic contribution – 80% of our exports still originate from rural and remote areas. Agriculture alone generates a quarter of the nation's exports total and over \$25 billion in export income.

However, rural and regional Australia continues to face survival and development challenges, due to a combination of forces including economic globalisation, rationalisation of government and community services, fluctuating commodity prices, transportation and infrastructure deterioration, youth loss due to limited employment and lifestyle options, and urban preoccupation and attitudes.

Small Town Australia is certainly at a crossroads. The majority of small inland towns continue to haemorrhage in terms of population and business life. This decline is not new, but has intensified over the last two decades. Mean age continues to rise, while the 15 – 24 age groups contracts dramatically. Such a situation is not uniquely Australian. Similarities can be seen in rural communities in the USA, New Zealand, South Africa and Western Europe.

This paper seeks to summarise –

- A picture of rural Australia and its demographic, economic social, technical and environmental changes and challenges.

- Concepts related to rural revitalisation, community and economic development, sustainability, healthy communities and resilience.
- A portrait of what constitutes a healthy, sustainable and resilient rural community; and
- A select bibliography for further information and rural revitalisation and sustainable community development.

B. PICTURE OF RURAL AUSTRALIA

Rural and regional Australia faces accelerating demographic, economic, social, technical and environmental changes and challenges. An understanding of these changes and their root causes is an essential starting point of rural revitalisation.

(a) Demographic Changes –

Throughout the twentieth century, Australians deserted what is affectionately referred to as ‘the bush’ and became predominantly urban city dwellers clinging to the coast. At the beginning of the twentieth century, most Australians lived in inland rural areas. 54% of the population lived in ‘the bush’ and only 37% of the population lived within what are now the eight states and territory capital cities. Another 9% of population inhabited large coastal towns. By the end of the twentieth century, ‘the bush’-big city ratio of Australians had almost reversed – 21% now live in ‘the bush’ and 63% and 16% respectively within capitals and coastal provincial cities. 71% of Australians now live in 10 cities.

Today the major trend is movement to the coast. The coastal communities associated with the Great Ocean Road and the Mornington Peninsula reflects this movement and growth. In the Shire of Moyne, Port Fairy continues its growth while it’s small inland towns like Macarthur, Hawkesdale and Mortlake decline.

The KPMG annual publication, *Population Growth (2000)*, reveals that during the twenty-two year period, 1976-1998, 198 rural municipalities lost population. In fact 75 communities lost more than 20% of population.

Between 1998-99, 120 rural municipalities lost more than 1% of their population base. Of the 456 rural municipalities, the Australian Bankers Association Study (1998:2) found 215 municipalities have been subject to – *‘..a process of sustained population loss since 1976. The result is a process of demographic erosion that has reduced the number of people in these 215 municipalities from 883,747 in 1976 to 778,452 in 1996, representing a decrease of 12%’.*

Communities associated with traditional industries in transition – mining, forestry and dry land farming are generally experiencing considerable population and service loss. The greatest population loss has happened in the wheat/sheep belt and the dry land grazing areas where the pressures of farm number shrinkage and aggregation, and the sponge attraction effects of large regional cities are the most felt. For example, the Shire of Buloke in the Wimmera, lost 34% of their population between 1976 – 1998.

Regarding youth loss, there has long been an established pattern of young adults moving from rural areas to the city. While a proportion of rural-urban migrants return, there are currently record net losses of young adults from non-metropolitan areas. Higher education, job opportunities or the motivation to travel and broaden experience ‘pull’ young rural people from their home towns. Perceptions of boredom, not ‘fitting in’ and being in a ‘goldfish bowl’ of small town life ‘pushes’ young people from rural areas.

(b) Economic Change -

One of the major economic changes in rural Australia has been the economic decline of agriculture. The NSW Government Rural Social Justice statement (1988) captured simply the challenge for agriculture – *‘the farm sector - for so long the backbone of the regional economy - continues to be faced with long term adjustment pressures and an uncertain trading environment. Farmers have had to contend with drought, flood, declining commodity prices, low profitability, and the consequences of past high interest rates and rising debt. The last decade has seen substantial industry restructuring.’*

Increased production, technology, developing markets and diversification have maintained the value of Australian agricultural production at relatively stable levels for decades. However, over the same period, world prices have led to a cost/price squeeze decreasing Australian farmer’s terms

of trade (prices received for outputs as a percentage of costs incurred in production) from over 200 in 1952-53 to 98 in 2000-01 (ABARE, 2000).

These pressures have moved agricultural production onto fewer and larger farms, with less employment over the last forty years, average farm size in Australia has doubled while the number of farms has almost halved. Agricultural employment has seen the number of Australian families making a living from farming reduce by 100,000 since 1970. A further reduction by up to 20% can be expected over the next ten years.

Implications of the decline in agricultural sector employment are well summarised by Collits (2000) – *'The consequences for rural communities have been equally stark. The need for fewer farm workers has led to out-migration, the nature of the services provided to farms by the communities has changed and their level diminished, and the formerly close relationship between farms and rural communities has declined'*.

Job loss in rural areas has also been just as dramatic in other sectors. In the last ten years, there has been a net loss of 66,000 regional railway jobs, and the last five years have seen the loss of over 10,000 rural bank jobs, almost solely due to loss of bank branches and staff positions due to the economic efficiencies of electronic banking. Asa Wahlquist has undertaken extensive research on public service loss in rural Australia, and estimates that up to 30,000 jobs disappeared from regional New South Wales in the decade to 1999 (Wahlquist, 1999).

There have been a number of specific factors operating within the Australian context. An analysis by the Australian Bankers Association (1998) indicates that towns which have experienced at least 20% population loss since 1976 tend to have had at least one of the following characteristics. They were:

- based on a depleted local mineral resource;
- based on local manufacturing in which advances in production methods have reduced the scale of the workforce required;
- based on a manufacturing activity that is no longer required in the local region;
- located in the wheat-sheep belt where there are natural economies of scale that have encouraged farm aggregation;

- located within a convenient drive time of a provincial city which offers services, employment, education and training;
- mining operations that have switched to fly-in, fly-out operations;
- located within a broader urban area which has experienced ageing of the local community of changing land use;
- physically isolated from the main highway systems; and
- formerly based on timber milling, small-scale farming or with a narrow sphere of economic influence over its immediate region

Finally, a major aspect of economic change is globalisation. Rural businesses now compete on global markets with worldwide exchange of information and capital. Global linkages are being driven by a revolution in telecommunications and information technology, the Internet, a gradual move towards free trade, increased participation in financial markets, and the opening of countries with the decline in communism.

For rural Australia, globalisation provides both advantages and drawbacks. Rural products can potentially gain access to a much wider market, rural businesses can be exposed to a wider range of investors, and business information and market intelligence from around the globe can be more rapidly shared. However, rural businesses also face greater competition in existing and new markets. Consumers can also bypass local supplies and obtain goods and services direct from national or international suppliers.

(c) **Social Change** -

Rural depopulation, reduced economic status, changing demographics and general changes in societal norms have contributed to a loss of social cohesion and community participation in rural areas. Out migration and the decline of the family farm have dispersed social networks. The decline of family farming reduces social cohesion and community participation. The specific loss of young people deprives communities of a socially active group and potential leaders.

Cavaye (1999) has also highlighted the impact of rural people developing economic and social links beyond their locality due to improved transport and communication means. Many small towns were created due to horse and train transport requirements. Today's car, telephone and internet have superimposed communication and travel patterns that allow rural people to

shop, utilise services and participate in recreation well beyond the local community.

Consequently, many of the smaller communities struggle economically and socially against the regional centres which are now aptly described by Salt (2000) as 'sponge cities'. Factors at work include *'better transport and communications, diminishing links between farmers and their local communities, the regionalisation of services, and the preferences of consumers for wider choices in products and services'* (Collits 2000).

One of the major social pressures is declining quality of life. Virtually every measure of the standard of living – income, health, education, aged care, access to services, infrastructure, and housing – is stable or declining in rural Australia.

Wahlquist (1998) claimed *'The Australian Newspaper has found that, by every significant measure, country Australians are worse off than their city cousins ... country people die younger and receive less medical attention, less education, and often inadequate telecommunication services'*.

For many indigenous Australian residents of small towns, income levels, health standards, employment rates, and civic participation continue to remain unacceptably low, and a source of continual frustration and challenge. Cross-cultural tension remains a strong and unresolved reality in many small towns.

An important part of the picture of rural Australia is that of the attitudes and emotional well being of rural people. Based on anecdotal evidence, many rural people are angry, frustrated and upset about low commodity prices, eroding rural infrastructure and services, and perceived lack of government attention. Numerous studies have highlighted the impact of social and economic changes on rural people and their feelings of being marginalised, excluded and not in control of their future. Many rural people blame government and other external influences; some feel 'workshopped' and 'meetinged' out, and have strong expectations of government-sponsored assistance. People are also more cynical and less trusting of government.

Economic and social change is also placing enormous stress on individuals, families, relationships, social ties and community organisations. Increased suicide and mental health problems in rural areas are closely linked to

economic conditions, limited lifestyle options and declining social cohesion. These problems are highest in remote and deprived locations with low levels of social support.

Finally, there have been a number of reports which have provided evidence about the negative impacts on small communities due to the contraction in health, education and banking services (Harrison, 1997, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission 1999, House of Representatives, 2000, Australian Bankers Association, 1998). The Australian Bureau of Statistics (1998) summarises the problems facing many small inland towns in Australia – *‘People living in declining towns risk losing their savings, livelihood and support systems as they confront the break-up of their community, loss of jobs, deteriorating infrastructure and declining property values. In addition, declining towns often lose service through the closure of schools, hospitals, retail establishments and banks. Such closures have a direct impact on the health and well being of remaining residents, but they can also have psychological impact, with many seeing the closure of central services as signalling the ‘death of a town’.*

(d) Technological Change -

Information technology also has dual impacts in rural areas. For example, the economic efficiencies of electronic banking have contributed to the loss of bank branches from rural towns. Information technology (IT) also brings new opportunities to rural areas such as the possibility of internet sales, and greater access to information and services such as video-conferenced medical consultations. It also is stimulating innovative information-based employment opportunities in rural areas such as teleworking. However, issues of line quality and speed of transmission in many rural areas continue to influence whether IT based businesses are viable.

(e) Environmental changes -

Increasingly, a variety of environmental challenges are impacting upon the quality of life of many small towns. Firstly, salinity and water quality are two of the most significant issues confronting rural communities and industries. Salinity currently affects 2.5 million hectares (5% of cultivated land). This figure could increase to 12 million hectares over the next 20 years and to 17 million hectares by 2050. Salinity threatens more than farming land. Currently over one third of rural river systems are adversely affected. Nearly 20,000 kilometres of road, 12,000 kilometres of streams and lakes, 306 towns and 80 important wetlands face degradation from salinity.

Secondly, growing community (especially metropolitan population) concern over logging of natural forest areas has forced governments to restrict forestry operations and extend national parks. Consequently, forestry jobs have been lost, and many rural communities are obliged to examine new economic and employment options.

Thirdly, the recent growth of plantation forestry on cleared agricultural land has had a major impact upon the farming and small town community landscapes, as illustrated in the Western Districts Studies (eg. Kelly, 2000) have found farm families benefiting from the sale or lease of land for plantations, but there had been a major negative impact at the community level in terms of population and infrastructure loss. She also found the transformation too rapid for many residents and that the new landscape contributed to a heightened sense of isolation.

(f) Centralism and Regionalism -

Certainly the cumulative impact of government and business policies to regionalise and centralise services has contributed to the decline of smaller communities. The Productivity Commission regularly advocates removal of barriers to mobility of labour and capital to enhance 'people prosperity' over 'place prosperity'. This approach sees no intrinsic merit in 'maintaining' small towns if people and business are opting for larger centres (Collits, 1999).

Less obvious has been the attitudinal contribution by some government officials and academics in projecting a dying small town scenario and the complementary response of advocating the value of building regional centres.

New South Wales academic, Tony Sorensen, has talked about ‘voluntary euthanasia’ as a possible policy response to small town decline (quoted in Collits, 1999). Queensland academic Geoff Cockfield advocated that towns that were flood prone or expensive to service should be relocated. The most recent academic ‘stir’ emanated from Victorian academic Gordon Forth who advocated that government, in the interests of the community and the Australian society in general, instead of trying to prop up small communities (less than 4,000 in population) would be better off providing subsidies to people to move to larger regional centres (Forth, 2000, 2001). Such statements attract widespread media attention, and contribute to community stress levels.

Demographic, economic, social, technological and attitudinal changes are transforming rural Australia. These pressures are long-term fundamental trends, not just a temporary rural downturn. They are the culmination of shifts that have been occurring for decades – basic changes in the demand for rural products and in society itself.

They challenge rural people to limit the disadvantages of these shifts and capitalise on the opportunities they present. Many rural towns struggle to retain infrastructure and services. Yet at the same time, other communities are also responding with creative ways of retaining employment, diversifying their economy and optimising the use of their resources.

C. KEY CONCEPTS

Below is a summary of the key concepts involved in rural revitalisation and sustainable community development, and their definitions.

- (i) **Rural Revitalisation** – refers to processes that seek to reverse rural decline, develop a more resilient, sustainable and diversified local economy and enhance the quality of life by building the community's capacity to adopt to, and benefit from global economic changes. It focuses on the stimulation of opportunities that will generate additional income and jobs, while preserving and enhancing the dynamics and features that makes rural life special.

The positive outcomes sought through rural revitalisation efforts often include -

- stabilising, and increasing, the size of population;
 - retaining and attracting back young men and women;
 - diversifying the economic and employment base of the community;
 - maintaining an adequate range of services and quality of life for residents;
 - increasing the levels of civic participation and community pride by residents; and
 - preserving what is special about the community.
- (ii) **Community and Economic Development** – includes those strategies, actions and processes that nurture, balance and sustain three interrelated activities – economic development, resource stewardship and community capacity building.
- ***Economic Development*** – processes that identify, harness and utilise resources to stimulate the economy and create new job opportunities. However community and economic development is not about creating any jobs and stimulating any form of economic activity and investment, it seeks to enhance the net number, quality

and variety of job opportunities and develop community appropriate and sustainable businesses and entrepreneurship.

- **Resource Stewardship** – refers to a mindset and initiatives that discourage sacrifice of a community’s tangible and intangible assets for short-term gain. It seeks to enhance economic opportunities and enhance quality of life without diminishing the quality of life enjoyed by other communities, now and in the future.
- **Community Capacity** – refers to the ability of a community to design and achieve a shared vision of the future. It consists of the networks, organization, attitudes, financial capacity, leadership and management skills that allow communities to manage change and sustain community-led development.

Community capacity building efforts include such initiatives as leadership development and renewal, strategic agenda setting, asset mapping and mobilisation, tracking and learning from success and failures, developing local financial capacity, building connections within the community and between the community and other communities and outside resources.

- (iii) **Healthy Communities** - health is certainly now seen as far more than the absence of disease. The two following definitions capture the more holistic interpretation –

'Health is an optimum state of well being... Health is wholeness. It includes a sense of belonging to community and experiencing control over one's circumstances and fate...'

'A healthy community is not a perfect place, but is in a dynamic state of renewal and improvement. It builds a culture that supports healthy life choices and a high quality of life...'

(Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities)

'A healthy community is one that is continually creating and improving those physical and social environments, and expanding those community resources which enable people to support each other in performing all the functions of life and in developing themselves to their maximum potential'

(Trevor Hancock and Len Duhn)

The Coalition for Healthier Cities and Communities is now a network of 450 organizations and more than 1,000 US communities that have actively embraced '*healthier communities*' principles, processes and indicators.

The Coalition utilising their *Healthy Community Agenda Dialogue Guide* supported a US nationwide set of dialogues in 1999. 4,000 people participated in one of 300 dialogues. The dialogues had two purposes. Firstly, to stimulate action at the local level in building healthier communities, and secondly, participants were asked to articulate a message to the nation about what they believed created health and improved quality of life.

From the responses the Coalition identified '*Seven Pillars of a Healthy Community*'. Such a community:-

- *shapes its future;*
- *cultivates leadership everywhere;*
- *creates a sense of community;*
- *connects people and resources;*
- *knows itself;*
- *practices ongoing dialogue; and*
- *embraces diversity*

A popular and current international concept for understanding a healthy community is that of social capital, made popular by Harvard University Professor Richard Putnam. Putnam during the course of a 20-year study of regional government in Italy found that the difference between regions that have prospered and those that had not, is the quality and intensity of citizen involvement in the life of their communities (Putnam 1993). Putnam could not explain the differences in terms of location, politics, geography, economic development or demographics. The differences were found in the socio-economic foundations that existed well before the creation of regional governments.

His famous statement was –

'these communities did not become civic simply because they were rich. The historical record strongly suggests precisely the opposite: they became rich because they were civic.'

Putnam's systematic inquiry illustrated the importance of long-standing traditions of civic engagement (or its absence) –

'voter turnout, newspaper readship, membership in choral societies and football clubs – these were the hallmarks of a successful region. In fact, historical analysis suggested that these networks of organised reciprocity and civic solidarity, far from being an epiphenomena of socio-economic modernisation, were a precondition for it.' (Putnam, 1995).

The key to creating prosperity, according to Putnam (1995) lies in the creation of social capital – *'those features of social organisation, such as networks, norms and trust, that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit'*. Social capital strengthens social well-being and the sense of community, enhancing the benefits of investments in physical and human capital.

The Strengthening Communities Unit of the New South Wales Premier's Department has highlighted the importance of social capital in rural renewal: *'In rural communities struggling to remain viable in the face of major social and economic change, the presence or absence of social capital is a major factor in how well these communities can cope. Social capital is becoming more crucial and more threatened in declining communities. Rural communities are particularly being challenged to develop and use local social linkages to develop community-led responses. High levels of social capital indicate a high quality of life. This does not necessarily equate with a high level of income. If people feel safe, happy and secure, they will work together to organise and interact to build a stronger community'* (2000).

International research highlights that social capital is built from the ground up. It takes time to develop and needs particular and concrete attention. Citizens are more likely to become involved when they believe that their contribution will make a difference. They are more likely to support the efforts of others when they trust the integrity of the effort. They are more likely to undertake new projects if they believe projects succeeded in the past. As Putnam (1995) expresses it – *'successful collaborations in one endeavour builds connections in other, unrelated tasks. As with conventional capital, those who have social capital tend to accumulate more – them as has, gets!'* Social capital is a resource that grows and compounds when utilised, but dissipates and becomes depleted when not used.

Last year, the Rural Women's Advisory Council of the federal government published a report entitled '*The Success Factors – Managing Change in regional and Rural Australia*' examining the factors behind the developmental success of seven rural towns. They claim '*How People Feel About their Community*' was the most important factor in the rating of success? It also highlighted the importance of volunteering in this positive feeling factor –

'Volunteering has consistently been identified in the study as a critical factor of the future success of rural and regional communities. It has been the single most important factor in people feeling good about their communities, and hence working for their communities with greater success... Yet the rate of volunteering is declining at a time when it is most needed. Older volunteers are burning out and younger people are being discouraged from participating by the prevalence of barriers that make them feel negative about their communities.'

(Rural Women's Advisory Council, 2001)

The box below also provides a useful tool – '*Characteristics of a Healthy and Enterprising Community*' developed by the Pew Partnership (USA) which provides a set of continuums that illustrate the contract between healthy and unhealthy communities.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A HEALTHY COMMUNITY

Healthy

Optimism, hope and 'we are in this together'
'We Can Do it'
Value intangibles like vision and values
Consensus building
Focus on the future
Interdependence
Broad community participation
Leadership renewal
Think and act in long term
Listening
Reconciliation
Win-win solutions
Politics of substance
Diversity and involvement
Challenge ideas
Problem solvers
View challenges as opportunities

Unhealthy

Cynicism
'Nothing works'
Emphasis only on tangibles
Polarisation
Debate the past
Parochialism
Few do everything
Same old faces
Short term thinking
Attacking
Hold grudges
Win-lose solutions
Politics of personality
Exclusion
Challenge people
Blockers and blamers
See themselves as victims

(iv) Sustainable Communities –

The term '*community sustainability*' is increasingly being used as a means of describing how positive change can be generated and managed. The idea of sustainable development was popularised by the 1987 Brundtland Report emanating from the World Commission on Environment and Development. Sustainable development was defined as '*development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs*'.

Much of the initial work on sustainability focused on global population, development, equity and environmental issues. Increasingly, many development organisations and communities are exploring what sustainability means for them in specific, local terms. Sustainability is being viewed as an umbrella concept that can assist in dealing in a comprehensive manner with the related goals of building healthy communities, promoting economic vitality, protecting the environment, managing change and enhancing the well being of community residents.

Here in Australia, the Strengthening Communities Unit of the New South Wales Premier's Department through their Sustainable Rural Communities (SRC) Project has pioneered exciting initiatives in terms of *'community sustainability'*. The Project Handbook (2000) uses the following definition – *'Sustainable communities maintain and improve their social, economic and environmental characteristics so that residents can continue to lead healthy, productive and enjoyable lives. Sustainable development in these communities is based on the understanding that a healthy environment and a healthy economy are both necessary for a healthy society'*.

The project advocates rural communities investigating their future potential through the lens of sustainability. It has developed a very helpful set of *'Ten Characteristics of Sustainable Rural Communities'* (see box below) plus ten tools to enable communities to research and analyse specific factors in a community to assess its level of sustainability.

KEY CHARACTERISTICS OF SUSTAINABLE RURAL COMMUNITIES
(According to the Strengthening Communities Unit, NSW Premier's Department)

1. The community takes an integrated approach to creating a sustainable future.
2. The community maximises the use of its limited time and resources in areas that will yield the greatest strategic benefits.
3. The community develops plans that merge social and economic goals and build local capacity.
4. The community is able to mobilise sectors of the community around priorities.
5. The community is able to focus its energies on mobilising internal assets while leveraging outside resources to achieve its goals.
6. The community has established a critical mass of cooperating organisations through which locally based initiatives are implemented and evaluated.
7. The community has strong, inclusive and visionary leadership.
8. The community promotes the well being of all its members by encouraging participation, consultation and involvement in community life.
9. The community values investment in education, training and lifelong learning.
10. The community has access to positive and accurate information with which it can evaluate its progress in achieving its goals.

(v) **Resilient Communities** –

Resilience according to the Centre for Community Enterprise (Canada) refers to '*intentional action to enhance the personal and collective capacity of its citizens and institutions to respond to, and influence, the course of social and economic change*'. (Centre for Community Enterprise, 2000)

The Centre preserves a 'Portrait of Community Resilience' listing 23 characteristics, as summarised in the box below.

CHARACTERISTICS OF A RESILIENT COMMUNITY
(According to the Centre for Community Enterprise in Canada)

- Characteristic 1: Leadership is diversified and representative
- Characteristic 2: Community leadership is visionary
- Characteristic 3: Community members are involved
- Characteristic 4: Community feels a sense of pride
- Characteristic 5: People feel optimistic about the future
- Characteristic 6: Spirit of mutual assistance and cooperation
- Characteristic 7: People feel a sense of attachment
- Characteristic 8: Community is self-reliant
- Characteristic 9: Belief in and support for education
- Characteristic 10: Key community economic development functions are served
- Characteristic 11: Organizations have developed partnerships
- Characteristic 12: Employment is diversified
- Characteristic 13: Major employers are locally owned
- Characteristic 14: A strategy for increasing local ownership
- Characteristic 15: Openness to alternative economic activity
- Characteristic 16: Community looks outside itself for resources
- Characteristic 17: Community is aware of its competitive position
- Characteristic 18: Community has a community economic development plan
- Characteristic 19: Citizens are involved in community vision and goals
- Characteristic 20: On-going action towards community economic development goals
- Characteristic 21: Regular evaluation of progress
- Characteristic 22: Organisations use the community economic development plan to guide their actions
- Characteristic 23: A development approach encompasses all population segments

(vi) Effective and Successful Communities

Several studies have introduced the concept of '*effective*' and '*successful*' communities. Firstly, The Oklahoma Community Institute (1998) in their study of vibrant rural communities have provided a set of characteristics for what they define as '*Effective Communities*'. Box below provides a summary.

CHARACTERISTICS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNITIES

- educate the community in the community's business;
- view challenges as opportunities instead of seeing themselves as victims;
- are open to diversity of citizen involvement and perspective;
- create opportunities for open, respectful community dialogue;
- have leaders who listen more than they talk
- are willing to share decision making;
- understand the concept of teamwork;
- aggressively work toward collaborative problem solving and consensus building;
- seek win/win solutions to issues and problems;

(The Oklahoma Community Institute)

Secondly, the concept of '*successful*' communities has been used by a variety of groups. Flora and Flora (1994) from the North Central Regional Centre for Rural Development, list eight characteristics of '*successful*' communities, namely

- acceptance of controversy;
- ability to depersonalise politics;
- surplus income to invest;
- willingness to take risks;
- ability to define community more broadly;
- network ability;
- emphasis on academics; and
- flexible, dispersed leadership.

The recent report of the Prime Ministers Youth Pathway's Action Plan Taskforce identified their concept of *Successful Communities* (see box below). A remarkable similarity exists between all these sets of characteristics for 'healthy', 'resilient', 'effective' and 'successful'.

SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITIES

- Build on the strengths of local individuals, associations and institutions;
- Focus on specific actions and measurable results to improve community life;
- Promote participation by people of all races, genders, cultures and age groups;
- Ensure local decision making and ownership;
- Draw upon the resources of the whole community;
- Bridge all sectors to develop healthy children, families and communities, and
- Share experience and knowledge to promote continuous community learning.

(According To Prime Ministers Youth Pathways Action Plan Taskforce 2001)

C. THE IDEAS PORTRAIT OF A HEALTHY AND ENTERPRISING RURAL COMMUNITY

Through project work with over 600 rural communities throughout Australia, New Zealand, USA and South Africa, the Bank of I.D.E.A.S. have identified ten key attitudes, behaviours and processes that contribute to the development of a healthy and enterprising community. They represent the key starting points for rural revitalisation.

Characteristic 1: Understands, Accepts and Embraces Change.

Without a doubt, the biggest challenge in rural Australia is 'change resistance'. The required attitude is well captured by the following quotes;

'We can either be victims of change or we can plan for it, shape it, and emerge stronger from it. The choice is ours'

(Sonaran Institute)

'We need to accept change, and make it our friend'

(Robert Theobald)

'Destiny is not a matter of chance; it's a matter of choice. It is not a thing to be waited for; it is a thing to be achieved'
(William Jennings Bryan)

Characteristic 2: Focuses on the Sustainable Triple Bottom Line – Economic Vitality, Environmental Integrity and Community Well-Being.

Such balance is now accepted as fundamental in the processes of community and economic development.

Characteristic 3: Encourages Broad Based Participation

Too many rural communities can be compared to an Australian Rules Football match where 30,000 people who need the exercise watch 36 players who do not! The 'same old faces' syndrome is a challenge in rural communities.

Communities need to be characterised by;

- Involvement
- Social connectedness
- Volunteerism
- Inclusiveness
- Respect for diversity
- Acceptance of new and alternative thinking
- Tolerance of controversy
- Continuous community dialogue and planning

Characteristic 4: Acts in a Comprehensive, Entrepreneurial and Opportunity Obsessive Manner.

If a hammer is your only tool, then every problem looks like a nail!

Sustainable community economic and employment development does not result from any 'quick fix' measures. It involves developing a mix of initiatives related to the community's competitive advantages. Both international and Australian experience of local economic and employment

development strategies illustrate that there are at least six broad and interrelated approaches that may be of value to a community. These are:

- retaining and expanding local businesses – actions which assist local businesses improve their productivity and market share;
- fostering new businesses – actions that encourage and support the creation of new businesses to add value to existing products, to meet changing consumer demands, or to capture sales which might otherwise go to other communities, regions or countries;
- attracting outside businesses and resources – actions that bring new investment, employers and funding to the community;
- Plugging the leaks in the local economy – actions that encourage greater loyalty in terms of purchasing by local residents and businesses;
- Enhancing the job linking capacity of the community – actions that utilise community development processes and social networks to support the job search activities of unemployed people, to help fill job vacancies more quickly, to discover hidden job opportunities, to improve information flows regarding job creation assistance and to help counter attitudinal reasons why some employers may not be increasing their workforce; and
- Marketing the community – actions that enhance the appeal and image of the community to potential visitors and new settlers.

Characteristic 5: Knows and Builds Upon the Community's Assets, Capacities, Skills, Competitive Advantages and Points of Difference.

Traditionally communities have tended to focus on their needs, deficiencies and weaknesses. Today the focus is increasingly on the use of techniques like asset mapping and appreciative inquiry which encourage commitment to identify internal assets and advantages.

'The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but having new eyes'
(*Marcel Proust*)

Characteristic 6: Promotes Civic Pride, Local Investment And Ownership.

McKnight and Kretzman (1995) summarize the importance of such mindset and behaviour –

‘All the historic evidence indicates that significant community development only takes place when local community people are committed to investing themselves and their resources in the effort. That's why you can't develop communities from the top down, or from the outside in’

(John McKnight, John Kretzmann,
Mapping Community Capacity)

Also Rural Communities are increasingly discovering that ‘you don’t get a second chance at first impressions’, and that the main street and town entrance statements are barometers to the level of confidence and pride.

Characteristic 7: Continually Renews and Builds a Diversified Leadership Base.

The famous McKinsey and Company report a regional development in Australia in 1994 – *‘Lead Local, Compete Global – Unlocking the Growth of Australian’s Regions’* summarised the importance of this characteristic –

‘Given the task of rejuvenating a region and the choice of \$50 million, or \$2 million and 20 committed local leaders, we would choose the smaller amount of money and the committed leaders’

Characteristic 8: Acts Strategically and Commits to Long Term and Continues Community Dialogue, Plans, Action and Evaluation.

That action / reflection commitment is paramount for successful rural revitalisation and sustainability. The use of appropriate community planning methodologies, idea generation, activities, evaluation indicators and action ornamented processes are essential.

Characteristic 9: Values Collaboration, Networking and Clustering.

The following behaviours are vital –

- Shared vision
- Win-win behaviour
- Consensus decision making
- Mutual assistance and cooperation
- Organisational smartness
- Networks with other communities

'Communities that prosper in the new environment aggressively practice collaborative problem solving and consensus decision making'
(Christopher Gates, National Civic League, USA)

Characteristic 10: Champions Passionate and Entrepreneurial Attitudes and Behaviours.

Passion represents that 'fire in the belly' attitude, that enthusiasm to make things happen. The word is derived from Latin origins – 'Passio' – to suffer. Like sporting or artistic success, it only comes often with that all consuming commitment.

Ray Powell from the Centre for Agriculture and Regional Economic summarised it well when he stated –

'Nowadays towns are really not so different from businesses, they need to keep recreating themselves. Not so many years ago country towns were subject to general trends. They would all do well or all do badly. The picture is now very uneven. The successful towns are likely to be driven by people who are passionate and creative, who see an opportunity and go for it. You need communities with a bit of get up and go spirit. Some have it, some don't.'

An excellent illustration of how passion and entrepreneurship can reverse the decline of a community is the impact of the Beechworth Bakery on the town of Beechworth. From humble beginnings in 1984 (\$100,000 turnover and 2 part-time staff), Tom O'Toole, the Beechworth Baker has created the largest turnover bakery in the southern hemisphere, and achieved the

following economic results in a town of 3000 people, three hours plus from Melbourne –

- Employs 65 people
- Turns over nearly \$3 million per year
- Took \$27,000 over the counter on one day (Easter Saturday)
- Attracts over 670,000 customers per year
- Offers 260 products
- Seats 300 customers
- Won the most significant Regional Tourism Award in Victoria for 3 years

Tom O'Toole's philosophy is captured with this quote –

'Passion. If your heart's not in it, get out. The sky's the limit if your heart's in it. You've got to have enthusiasm. If you haven't got enthusiasm you're buggered!'

Perhaps in summary, these ten characteristics are based summarised by a quote by John Schaar –

*'The future is not a place to which we are going,
it is a place we are creating.
The paths to the future are not found,
but made
And the activity of
making them
Changes both the maker
And the destination'.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Peter Kenyon is a social entrepreneur and community enthusiast. Over the last decade he has worked with over 1000 communities throughout Australia and overseas seeking fresh and creative ways to stimulate inspiring and novel approaches to community and economic renewal. He is motivated by the desire to create healthy and enterprising communities.

Peter has had a background as a youth worker, teacher and tertiary lecturer. With experiences as Director of Employment in Western Australia, Manager of the Community Employment development unit in New Zealand and coordinator of the Natal Kwazulu Job Creation and Enterprise Strategy in South Africa.

Peter became convinced that one cannot develop communities from the top down or from the outside in. It required communities to build from the inside out, and for their residents to invest themselves, ideas, assets and resources in the process. Subsequently, he created the Bank of I.D.E.A.S. (Initiatives for the Development of Enterprising Action and Strategies) to promote such a paradigm shift and assist with the necessary facilitation, ideas and skills.

Peter's consulting work has resulted in assignments in 30 countries and all states of Australia. In the last six years, Peter has authored fourteen publications within the fields of community and economic development, and youth policy development and youth enterprise,

- *The Small Town Renewal Kit*
- *Creating Better Educational and Employment Opportunities for Rural Young People*
- *Ready Set Go : A Better Practice Kit for Local and Regional Economic Development*
- *Youth Enterprise Matters: Involving Young People in their Economic Futures*
- *Survival and Revival in Rural; Australia*
- *Taking the Lead: a Community Resource Kit for Local Economic Development*
- *The Business Retention and Expansion Program - Resource Manual*

- *Community Builders – Resource manual*
- *Formulating and Implementing National Youth Policies*
- *Youth Policy Formulations Manual*
- *Young People in Self Employment*
- *Good Enough Never Is ...lessons from inspirational businesses in rural Australia*