

Coping with a Crisis: Human Services in Times of Drought

by Margaret Alston & Jenny Kent

Abstract

This paper draws on original research conducted in 2003 with drought-affected people and communities in inland NSW. The paper outlines the scale of the drought, its social impacts and the resultant need for services. Income support mechanisms aimed at drought-affected people and communities such as the Exceptional Services scheme have proved cumbersome, slow and overly complicated leaving many people without income for considerable periods. Our research shows that human services in the areas studied are largely overloaded and inadequately resourced. Many services rely on aged volunteers and there has been significant pressure on charities to deliver services not provided elsewhere. Delivery of human services in times of crisis such as drought is however, not straightforward. Many people affected by drought are unwilling to approach human services preferring stoicism to any admission of need. One result of this attitude is that 'acceptable' services such as the Rural Financial Counsellors are vastly overloaded and some of these cases may be better handled by trained human service workers. The paper provides insights into more appropriate service models for rural communities in crisis.

Introduction

The twenty-first century has brought a sustained period of drought to Australia's rural areas. The widespread nature of the drought, extending from Western Australia to the far reaches of Queensland and throughout New South Wales and Victoria; its length - in some cases up to four years; and its intensity; have led to it being labelled by the Prime Minister, John Howard, as the worst in over 100 years (Howard 2002). This period of drought has not only been evidenced by reduced rainfall, but has also featured average temperatures up to 1.6° hotter (Lindesay 2003, p.42), suggesting that climate change factors are implicated. Botterill and Fisher (2003) report that the drought has cost the Australian economy \$7 billion making it not only environmentally devastating, but also an economic disaster. While we know a great deal about the drought's impact environmentally and economically, we know far less about the social impacts. Yet the people most affected, those on farms and in rural communities, have been coping with this crisis for a lengthy period of time. In 2003 NSW Agriculture and the NSW Premier's Department funded a team of researchers from the Centre for Rural Social Research to undertake a study of the social impacts of the drought. This paper draws on that research focusing particularly on

the implications for human services in drought affected areas. For the purposes of the paper human services are defined as those designed to address health and welfare issues and include both government and non-government services.

Of significance is that pre-drought trends and policies in Australia's rural areas have resulted in reduced government interventions and a decline in service delivery (Alston 2002a; Cheers & Taylor 2001). Globalisation and a commitment by governments to market primacy, coupled with neoliberal policies fostering smaller government, privatisation and self-help (Gray & Lawrence, 2001) have had major effects on rural areas in general and human services in particular. Additionally more marginal returns in agriculture have resulted in the greater mobility of rural people with pronounced population shifts from inland areas to cities and coastal regions (Salt 1992; 2001). One result of rural outmigration is that the communities left behind are aging at faster rates than metropolitan areas (Birrell 2000) suggesting a greater need for services. While demographic changes and service decline were evident in the 1990s so too were problems of attracting staff such as health professionals, doctors, nurses and other professionals (Alston, Pawar, Bell & Kent 2001). As a consequence many rural human services were in a state of crisis prior to the drought.

The onset of a major drought has added another layer of complexity to rural human service delivery. This paper examines initially the context of rural communities and of agriculture in order to provide a backdrop to the discussion of drought. Corroborating previous research on drought (Gray, Lawrence and Stehlik 1999), the paper notes that attempts by governments to redefine drought as a management issue rather

than a natural disaster ignores the fact that those living with drought still view it as a disaster with significant impacts on their health and welfare. Drawing on the drought study (Alston & Kent 2004), the social impacts of the drought crisis and service responses are then discussed prior to a more focused examination of human service issues. This research reveals that policy is clearly out of step with the reality of drought. Finally the paper provides a discussion of models of rural service delivery in times of crisis.

The Context of Australian Agriculture and Rural Communities – Pre-drought

In order to understand the full implications of drought for rural and regional human services, it is instructive to examine the composition of rural communities and the social relations of agriculture prior to the drought. Inland Australia is sparsely populated with approximately 82 percent of the Australian population living in the major metropolitan regions and along the coastlines while the remainder live in inland Australia in small rural centres and regional cities. In contrast to other Australians 69.7 percent of Indigenous Australians live in rural areas with populations of less than 100,000 (Cheers & Taylor 2001) making Indigenous Australians particularly vulnerable to rural service decline.

Many people from small inland rural communities are gravitating to regional 'sponge' cities or the coast (Salt 1992, 2001) and one of the significant motivators for this movement is the withdrawal of services to regional cities, a process of regionalisation that forces many people to move to be closer to the services they need. The towns most likely to be in decline are in the more remote areas while the 60 percent of

towns that are growing (Tonts 2000) are largely in coastal, semi-urban or mining areas.

A steady reduction in services in small rural communities was evident prior to the drought and, as Cheers & Taylor (2001, p 207) note, even preceding the drought it was clear that the Australian welfare system had failed rural people. They are more likely to live in poverty, to have reduced income, higher levels of unemployment, lower education levels and higher levels of morbidity, while at the same time having reduced service access and support (Forth & Howell 2001; Cheers 1998).

The impact of low returns in agriculture and consequent adjustment processes have resulted in a 25 percent decline in the number of farms (approximately 40 000 farms) over a quarter of a century (Gray & Lawrence 2001) to about 140 700 farms (Garnaut & Lim-Applegate 1998). What has not changed is that over 95 percent of farms are still operated by farm families (Garnaut & Lim-Applegate 1998). The structural adjustment processes have been particularly significant for rural women who have increased their farm labour and are more likely to be working off the farm while retaining major responsibility for household and care work (Alston 1995; 2000). Prior to the drought approximately 50 percent of farms were reliant on off-farm income with approximately 80 percent of this being done by women (Society of St Vincent de Paul 1998; RIRDC & DPIE 1998). Generally this work is sought in rural communities and regional centres and many farm women seek work in human services positions (Alston & Kent 2004). The erosion of services in small communities is therefore not only undermining service infrastructure but also employment options for women on farms, potentially further destabilising the viability of agriculture. The onset

of drought and the critical need for off-farm income has exposed the lack of employment options for people dependent on the rural labour market.

Globalisation, structural adjustment, the loss of services and the downturn in the rural labour market have accelerated rural population mobility. Those most likely to leave small rural communities are young people in the 15-24 year age groups (Alston 2002b) who move away in search of work and higher education. In some cases up to 90 percent of young people signal an intention to leave their community on completion of high school (Alston, Pawar, Bell & Kent 2001). It is also evident that this exodus is significantly gendered as more young women than young men migrate to the cities from rural communities, a direct result of the lack of work and their quest for higher education (Alston 2002b). The loss of young people and the greater loss of young women have led to exposure in the media of the issue of young rural men unable to find partners, a situation not unique to Australia (see for example Ni Laoire 2001 in relation to Ireland). Changes in the composition of rural communities, the steady erosion of the rural labour market and the loss of human services have left communities particularly vulnerable in times of natural disaster. The onset of a major drought has exposed these vulnerabilities. Yet those responsible for policy development around drought appear to downplay the human face of the disaster being played out in the inland.

Drought Policy

A change in government drought policy during the 1990s resulted in a shift from drought being viewed as a natural disaster to drought being portrayed as a manageable risk (Higgins 2001). During this period the Drought Policy

Review Panel determined that fostering self-reliance amongst farming families would be the basis of any further action around drought funding (Stehlik, Gray & Lawrence 1999) and, in keeping with the neoliberal line, that governments would reduce their interventions in drought support, funding or recovery processes (Botterill 2002). The problem with this hardline, neoliberal approach as Gray, Lawrence and Stehlik (1999) note, is that those most impacted by drought – the farm families and those living in rural communities dependent on agriculture – view drought as a disaster. The incremental nature of drought, with its slow but steady erosion of hope and possibilities profoundly impacts the health and well-being of rural people. The concept of drought as a manageable risk seems particularly inappropriate during this one in one hundred year drought. The steady realisation of the scale of the human drama resulting from the drought and the inadequacy of the Exceptional Circumstances relief measures available to families resulted in the announcement of interim drought support measures in December 2002. While drought policy has been inadequate to deal with the scale of the drought, so too has been policy relating to human service delivery.

Policies Affecting Rural Human Service Delivery

Economic fundamentalist policies adopted by governments over the last twenty years have seen a reduction in the role of government, particularly in relation to service delivery, a position that has particularly affected rural communities. The neoliberal policy response to globalisation has resulted in the withdrawal of services, a greater reliance on market forces, adoption of user-pays principles and a commitment to privatisation of services thus removing government from the front-line

of service delivery and response.

The loss of services in small rural communities has been driven by regionalisation (centralising services in regional cities), rationalisation (allocating services based on supply and demand principles), centralisation (pulling service administration back to the capital cities) and privatisation (tendering out services previously provided by government). Further, in rural communities the adoption of principles of privatisation and the devolution of services to non-government organisations has not necessarily meant that successful tenderers have been those with the most experience in the welfare field. In some cases tenders have been awarded to organisations from outside particular areas while local service providers have been unsuccessful. As a result, local expertise, knowledge and networks have been lost (Duncombe 1999). These processes have not only destabilised rural populations but also left many communities with fewer services, and fewer long-term career oriented jobs and entry level positions in these organisations.

The application of national competition policy to welfare provision has been an area of concern for rural welfare practitioners. Cheers & Taylor (2001) and Taylor (1999) note that these policies have seen the introduction of competitive tendering, targeted funding, the introduction of contract based welfare service delivery and greater expectations of financial accountability. The effect on rural community service delivery has been a reduced level of services, a reduction of choice and greater financial burdens on rural organisations (Cheers & Taylor 2001; Duncombe 1999; Raysmith 1998).

Drawing from this discussion it is important then to note that: many

Australians live in small rural communities dependent on agriculture; a significant number are part of family farm units dependent on agriculture for their livelihoods; rural populations in many inland areas were declining or static prior to the drought (Tonts 2000); a more conservative and economic fundamentalist policy environment preceded the drought; services had been withdrawn from small rural communities; and many existing services had difficulty meeting demand for services. The onset of the drought exposed the paucity of services and the problems inherent in servicing from a distance. Our study in 2003 allowed an examination of the impacts of the drought on small rural communities, farm families and the services that support them.

Examining the Impacts of Drought on Rural People and Communities

In 2003, our study of the social impacts of drought funded by New South Wales Department of Agriculture and the New South Wales Premiers Department, was undertaken by a team of researchers from the Centre for Rural Social Research at Charles Sturt University. The key objectives were to assess the social impacts of the drought on farm families, small businesses and rural communities. Three communities were selected for in-depth study and these included a remote town in the far western region of New South Wales surrounding a town with a population of 3900, a broadacre farming region in the central west of the state surrounding a town with a population of 3500, and an irrigation community in south-west New South Wales with a population of 7800. The communities chosen were typical of small towns dependent on agricultural production. In each community, in-depth interviews were

conducted with farm families, service providers, small business owners and other key informants, and a number of focus groups were conducted with small business groups and service providers. Qualitative methodology was favoured to allow those most affected to describe the meaning that drought had in their lives and to allow those interviewed to draw out the social implications of this experience. In all, over 120 interviews were conducted, taped and transcribed. This paper draws on the interviews with farm family members, small business proprietors and service providers in the three communities.

Social Impacts

Despite the contrast in the study areas and their diverse agricultural base, it became clear to the researchers that the social implications of drought are similar in each region. For farm families and small business operators, this has meant loss of income, increased workloads, a downturn in businesses, increasing stress, health and welfare issues, reduced community participation and social isolation. For the rural communities studied there was evidence of escalating poverty, a loss of jobs and declining social capital as well as population loss as laid off workers and contractors left to find work elsewhere. Our interviews revealed communities in crisis.

There's a fair bit of anger but there's panic as well. ... Panic sort of struck a bit probably about August / September [when it was clear that winter rain had not come] and November / December was just total absolute mayhem [when it was clear that once again there were no crops]. ... and now people are just stressed to the max. (Service provider)

Our interviews with farm families indicate drought as a gendered experience, an issue clearly emerging from a previous drought study (see Stehlik, Gray & Lawrence 1999; Stehlik, Lawrence & Gray 2000). Men on farms were more likely to be coping with the day to day reality of feeding stock, watching paddocks blow away and increasing social isolation.

You've lost a bit of your heart ... you've lost a bit of yourself. ... It will never be quite the same. It will never be quite as good again. ... There won't be as much drive there. (Farm man)

Women were more likely to be working off the farm, to have increased their farm workload and to be monitoring the emotional health of family members. Moreover off-farm work was no longer an option for many families.

Even after the drought's finished I am now looking at working probably forever. (Farm woman)

She's 58, her back's not that flash. She's been wanting to knock off work for a few years but financially I don't see how it's possible. (Farm man)

It was clear from this research that many women are working in health and service related positions, and it was not uncommon for farm women to be employed as nurses and counsellors. Many women noted that they were coping with their own drought experiences while also dealing with the issues of others. One health services manager noted that she spent part of her time counselling those of her staff from farm family backgrounds going through personal drought crises. For those who had had to leave home to find work, involuntarily separating from their

families, this added significant stress to a difficult situation. Given the paucity of work in rural communities, particularly in the remote areas of the state, many families were involuntarily separating so that women could move to find work.

I prefer to be at home than to have to move [into town]. ... It was very hard. It was very hard on everyone. We are a very close-knit family and I certainly didn't want to move into town. It was very hard on [son]. He used to get quite upset Sunday night when I was ready to go which was really hard. (Farm woman moved 160 kms to town)

In contrast to earlier drought studies, the impact of the introduction of GST legislation and the cementing of women's role as farm financial managers was clearly evident in this research.

Two very clear roles have emerged, a financial control role that in a lot of cases the woman's taken on and a production role. And the husband has happily relinquished all that responsibility ... and he's offloaded all that pressure. ... In the financial management role there is a responsibility to be compliant in a legal sense. That in itself is a huge responsibility. (Service provider)

It seems to be the women who are trying to find the money to pay the bills. ... Their husbands just go out the door, don't want to know. They are left with a pile of paperwork and they are the ones who are worrying about it. (Service provider)

Nonetheless the stresses on both farm men and farm women were apparent in this study.

He's depressed, he's cranky with the kids all the time. He's cranky with me all the time. He drinks more. He smokes more. ... he feels that if he doesn't get out he'll go mad. (Farm woman)

Stress is a hard thing to accept. And you've got to get used to it. If you can't handle it it'll get you down. You've got to switch off. But it's hard to handle. (Farm man)

I'm desperate and hanging on by the skin of my teeth. (Farm man)

You're never away from work on the farm. You are living on the thing so all your time is spent here. ... You get very down and tend to sit and look at things. (Farm man)

You seem to say 'Oh it can't get any worse, it can't get any worse', and it is still continuing. ... and you lose a little bit of hope and that's really dangerous. (Farm woman)

It was also clear that elderly farm family members and children were affected by the stress associated with drought. It was evident that elderly family members and children are doing long hours on drought affected farms.

Some mornings when I get up and find I can hardly walk outside for arthritis ... I suffer from a lot of problems with my bones, my back, osteoporosis, arthritis, and a few other problems. It takes me a long time to get up and a long time to get down and I'm in pain all day long. ... We have just grown old while this drought has been on. (Farm man)

My daughter's definitely affected by the drought. You go to town she refuses to spend money because she knows there's none to spend. She's wearing jeans that are too tight and too short ... she won't complain, she knows the money's not there. ... She won't have a lunch order. (Farm woman)

[Son aged 11] is a good little worker because he's the only one there [no hired labour] so he hasn't really got much choice. (Farm woman)

The stress of drought is not confined to farm families - small business proprietors noted similar levels of stress.

I'm under huge financial pressure as a result of the drought. I've got a one hundred and twenty thousand dollar debt that has developed over the last twelve months or so ...and one of the factors that has led to this is the inability of people to pay their bills. (Business person)

A further consequence of drought evident in this research is the rise in social isolation.

And there is that sort of withdrawal [by men] into themselves and away from their communities and families. (Farm woman)

I haven't been to town for two months ... because you spend money when you go. (Farm woman)

Rural Services

Each community was well served by local doctors, although the lack of bulk-billing was restricting access to medical services for some. Generic health services and rural financial counsellors

were also available although it was clear that these services were significantly overloaded. Drought support workers employed by NSW Agriculture were located in two of the communities visited. Significantly lacking were specialist mental health services and ready access to Centrelink.

There is a rise in mental health issues and we've had to deal with a number of cases and part of the problem has been that the personnel on the ground aren't here. Like it's really not easy to get help sometimes for someone in an isolated situation. (Service provider)

While small business operators noted that they did not have the same access to financial counselling, it was clear that farm families viewed the Rural Financial Counsellors as the first port of call because they were seen as 'safe'. The service providers were respected and their confidential consultations highly valued.

Oh that place down there [rural counselling service] is just wonderful. They don't get paid enough. I don't know what they get paid but they don't get paid enough. (Farm woman)

While farm families implied that the consultations were about financial matters, the counsellors themselves saw it differently noting that most consultations were more akin to emotional and health counselling.

I'm not a social counsellor. After three and a half years I can handle it. It would have been good to have that knowledge or experience before taking on the role. [Rural Financial Counsellor]

They come to us because there's nobody else and it's cost-effective because we don't charge. We're not fee for service. (Rural Financial Counsellor)

Nonetheless one of the problems service providers face is the stoicism of rural people and their reluctance to admit that they need emotional support.

He won't go [to health services] (Farm woman)

I see very, very strong women cracking and I have advised them to go to the doctors. ... They are crying on the phone. Most of them are broken by the time they get to where they are talking. (Service provider)

A critical factor pushing families to the brink in many cases is the inability to access income support because claiming funding under Exceptional Circumstances provisions is a tortuous process that may take several months even when successful. The result is that many families who took part in our research were living in extreme poverty. Lack of services and income support means that charities are forced to take up the slack.

We've gone to Salvation Army and had the phone bill and the power bill paid and our Rural Counsellor got a couple of thousand dollars from DOCS ... Red Cross sent us a thousand ... St Vinnies paid the rates ... my wife won't go back to them no more because she feels humiliated. (Farm man)

We have exhausted every cent that we had. We are relying entirely on St Vincent de Paul to get us through. (Farm man)

Vinnies and the Salvos are really getting under siege from people requiring stuff. (Service provider)

Nonetheless it was evident that the charities were largely staffed by aged volunteers and yet high workloads and lack of funds has significantly reduced the pool of volunteers in rural communities.

We need replacement [volunteers] because a lot of them [our volunteers] should be clients themselves. (Service provider)

Meanwhile the loss of social capital and a growing sense of alienation were evident in this research indicating that the lack of services and support were viewed by many as a negation of the worth of rural individuals.

Every family that you lose also means a less viable school, a less viable doctor, a less viable hospital and also a spiralling social capital. (Service provider)

You just feel like you are alienated and that no one really gives a damn. (Farm man)

Because we are so run off our feet we have not been able to lobby anyone. We have lost faith in the system through that alienation. (Young farm woman)

We feel left out of the picture and isolated. (Farm woman)

Many service workers expressed a sense of extreme frustration that rural people had been left with few supports.

[politicians] must think we're silly. [They have] a reluctance to comprehend the situation ... people are suffering extremely ... walk in their shoes just for five minutes! (Service provider)

Human Service Issues

It is clear from this discussion that families in drought areas dependent on agriculture either directly or indirectly for their livelihood have significant problems obtaining income support and accessing services. The change in focus in policy from a view that drought is a natural disaster to one where drought is portrayed as a manageable risk has had significant impacts on farm families and rural community members whose health and welfare are critically impacted by the drought. The problem with this approach is that governments have failed to adequately separate support for farm businesses from welfare support for farm families in need. The inevitable consequence, as demonstrated in this drought, is that families have quickly slipped into poverty, receiving reduced help from governments in the process, and having limited access to services to help them through this significant social crisis. Yet our study reveals the depth of crisis for many families involved is extreme.

Meanwhile the neoliberal policy approach to service funding and delivery has also impacted on the availability of services for people most affected by this crisis. The slow erosion of service infrastructure prior to the drought has left communities not only with limited capacity to address the scale of the issues but also with limited funding to increase their support. The loss of services and the resulting low level of servicing into small inland towns have left the most vulnerable

with reduced support in their own communities and a reduced capacity to travel to regional centres. Many human services responding to the consequences of national competition policy have introduced a fee for service cost structure, a factor that may act as a significant barrier to those in need.

As a result of a lack of services and income support, the charitable organisations in each area studied were critically overloaded. These organisations were attempting to deal with the problems facing families in poverty. Hence there is a strong expressed need to pay phone and other utility bills, to provide food parcels and clothing. These organisations, the Salvation Army (Salvos), St Vincent de Paul (St Vinnies) and the Red Cross are largely operated by aged volunteers and it was clear that the drought had created needs beyond the ability of the community to absorb.

Our study reveals that in each area there were sufficient doctors. It was noted however that a lack of bulk-billing, and a perception that people were not coming to town for medical consultations because of financial and time pressures, meant that many may not be seeking medical help and /or waiting until the drought breaks before presenting with medical problems. Only the largest of the three communities studied had a Centrelink office in the town. As a result many people interviewed lacked information about benefits and entitlements and had a reduced capacity to make application for support. Other health and welfare services in the three areas studied appear overloaded, understaffed and under-resourced and many workers are struggling to alert those with the power to make a difference, to step outside ideological and policy boundaries and appraise the full human tragedy of the drought. Service providers in

both government and non-government agencies told of their own frustration at their own three or six month contracts, knowing that the length of the drought would see problems continue for some time even after the rains came.

As a result it is not difficult to understand why the Rural Financial Counsellors are the counsellors of first choice for farm families. These counsellors are readily available, accessible in the small communities, do not charge a fee, take the time to visit families on their farms and are viewed as safe because of the financial focus of the contact. In all areas these workers were critically overloaded. One noted that her caseload had risen from between twenty and thirty to over one hundred and thirty and that she was resigning because she felt unable to effectively deal with the workload. Because the service is part funded by state and federal governments and 25 percent by the local community, extending the service through the appointment of additional workers is a complex process. All of these workers reported that they were working way beyond normal capacity and that they were undertaking a significant amount of emotional counselling, a role for which they are not trained.

In all communities the lack of specialist mental health services was noted. Seeking specialist attention requires community members to travel and, usually, to stay overnight, a cost that is difficult to bear during the drought. It was not unusual for interviewees to note that they were delaying treatment that required this effort. As the drought lengthened it was clear that the lack of ability to attend to the developing mental health problems was a major issue for communities. In one community, however, we were struck by the innovative attempts made by service providers to reach isolated people in their communities. The social worker

employed by the mental health team arranged for the local doctor, the Rural Financial Counsellor and a masseur to accompany her to a pub some distance from the town to allow men to come for consultations during the day. The innovative approach achieved a significant response.

Because of the high demand for services, it was clear to the research team that the stress on workers themselves was significant. While many were farm family members, it was clear that additional supervisory support for workers was necessary regardless of their status in relation to farming. Because of regionalisation and centralisation many were responding to management personnel who were located at significant distances from the town and had limited understanding of the consequences of drought for the community.

Rural Service Models

The drought has revealed the shortcomings of economist fundamentalist policies being applied to rural welfare provision. It has also exposed the pressures on services on the ground when rationalisation, regionalisation, centralisation and privatisation processes are adopted within the human services system. What is needed is a more humane response to service delivery into areas of low population base where a social crisis of significant proportions is ongoing. The writers hope that by raising these issues an ongoing debate on appropriate rural human service delivery models that result in attention to social justice and the human rights of rural people will commence.

Rural service models must, first and foremost, be culturally appropriate taking account of a general reluctance

on the part of rural people to seek help. Farm family members feel safe with Rural Financial Counsellors, for example. They are visible members of the community, attuned to community issues, know the lived experience of drought, provide sound advice and help prepare applications for funding under drought support schemes. Community members view the service as a financial management service and therefore there is no stigma attached to the clients attending. Most importantly Rural Financial Counsellors are available and will travel to the client's home if necessary. While this model is one that deserves ongoing funding, it should be viewed as the basis of something much larger. Given the concerns expressed by counsellors themselves over their inexperience in dealing with 'emotional counselling', it would make sense to expand the service to include social workers co-located with financial counsellors. This would allow those trained to deal with this work to provide the additional support needed. Given the lack of services for small business owners in small rural communities, it would also make sense to open up access to Rural Financial Counselling services to small businesses in rural communities.

While the drought support workers employed by the New South Wales government have provided effective additional services, their short-term six-month contracts have made it difficult for the workers to undertake long-term planning. While these contracts have been extended more than once, a more long-term planning approach would facilitate more effective practice.

Interagency cooperation between government and non-government service providers and charities would also assist in a more comprehensive attention to service provision in small communities affected by natural disaster. This

would allow scarce resources to be more effectively targeted and allow a combined approach to government for upgraded service infrastructure. The resulting multi-disciplinary approach would usefully serve the development of rural services.

It is clear from this study that charities have been covering for the paucity of service infrastructure in rural communities. Charities are not funded to address the amount of work they have been performing during the drought nor are they staffed to cope with this increased demand. It is clear that the charities are masking the inadequacies of government service provision resulting from ineffective policy. A lack of accountability by governments to the needs of people living through crisis is exposed in this research.

In developing a model of service provision that is rurally appropriate, it also makes sense to bring the management of services 'closer to the ground'. Currently many service providers report to managers in a regional centre at some distance from their service. As a result the scale of need and level of support may not be adequately addressed. If responsibility is devolved to local levels a more adequate representation on staffing and resourcing linked to need may result. It is clear that many services are inadequately staffed, and that many are staffed by new graduates. Attention to the staffing and resourcing of rural services is urgently required. At the same time staff need to be adequately recompensed for their work. Comments by the Deputy Leader of the Liberal Party, Peter Costello, in December 1999 that we should have a 'more flexible approach' to wages in the bush are unhelpful if we are to attract senior staff to rural services. At the same time the provision of adequate supervision for isolated rural workers is needed to

address the high turnover of workers from the bush.

This research indicates that rural services that facilitate access to isolated people through outreach capabilities or dial-in access are more effective at reaching those in need. Many people on farms noted they were unable to come to town as frequently as they did before the drought because of their increased workloads during drought and because of the cost factor involved. The Rural Financial Counsellors and Drought Support Workers make time to travel to their clients and this is regarded favourably by farm family members.

Our study reveals that it is usually women who will make the first approach for help and it was not unusual for service providers to note that women rang or visited initially without telling their partners they had sought assistance. Targeting service information at women and providing information sessions for women's organisations would appear to make sense.

Any rural service model must address the needs of those not adequately serviced at present. Our research indicates that the aged and children are under-served. In one community a worker noted she organised regularly for aged farm family members to be hospitalised as a way of providing them with respite from drought stresses. Young people are also particularly silenced and their voices have not formed part of the discourse on drought. Yet our interviews with service providers, school personnel and parents reveal that children are particularly vulnerable, picking up on the stresses of their parents and others in their communities.

No human service infrastructure is adequate unless income support options are readily available to people

in crisis. Our model of service support presupposes that rural people will have the same access to support for poverty alleviation as other Australians. This research shows that drought is a social crisis demanding a disaster response. If we are to prevent the unravelling of rural communities and arrest the growing sense of isolation and alienation amongst rural people then we must change the discourse of drought from one of managerial responsibility to one of social justice in the face of significant hardship.

Bibliography

- Alston, M 1995, *Women on the Land: the hidden heart of rural Australia*, UNSW Press, Kensington, NSW.
- Alston, M 2002a, 'From local to global: Making social policy more effective for rural community capacity building', *Australian Social Work*, vol 55, no.3, pp. 214-226.
- Alston, M 2002b, 'Inland rural towns: Are they sustainable?', Keynote address to the ABARE Outlook Conference, Canberra, March 5-7.
- Alston, M & Kent, J 2004, *Social impacts of drought: A report to NSW Agriculture and the NSW Premiers Department*, Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW.
- Alston, M, Pawar, M, Bell, K & Kent, J 2001, *Tertiary education access needs in the Western Riverina*, Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW.
- Birrell, B 2000, *Concerns over greying of rural NSW*, quoted in *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 March, p.1.
- Botterill, L 2002, *Government responses to farm poverty 1989-98: The policy development process*, Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation.
- RIRDC publication No 02/163 RIRDC Project No ANU-43A, Canberra.
- Botterill, L & Fisher, M (eds.) 2003, *Beyond drought: People, policy and perspectives*, CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Vic Timeline p. ii.
- Cheers, B 1998, *Welfare bushed: Social care in rural Australia*, Ashgate, Aldershot, UK.
- Cheers, B & Taylor, J 2001, 'Social work in rural and remote Australia', in *Social Work Fields of Practice*, M Alston & J McKinnon (eds.), Oxford University Press, Melbourne, pp. 206-19.
- Costello, P 1999 interviewed on PM, December viewed 7 October 2004, <<http://www.abc.net.au/pm/s73040.htm>>.
- Duncombe, R 1999, 'Job Network on the North Coast of NSW', Unpublished paper, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, NSW.
- Forth, G. & Howell K. 2001, 'Don't cry for me Upper Wombat: Realities of regional / small town decline in non-coastal Australia', *Sustaining Regions*, vol 2, no 2, pp. 4-11.
- Garnaut, J & Lim-Applegate H 1998, *People in farming*, ABARE Research Report 98.6. Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.
- Gray, I & Lawrence G 2001, *A future for regional Australia: Escaping global misfortune*, Cambridge University Press, Oakleigh, Victoria.
- Higgins, V 2001, 'Calculating climate: 'Advanced Liberalism' and the governing of risk in Australian drought policy', *Journal of Sociology*, vol 37, no. 3, September, pp. 299-316.
- Howard, J Prime Minister of Australia 2002, Media release, 9 December, viewed 7 October 2004, http://www.pm.gov.au/news/media_releases/2002/media_release2025.htm>.

Lindesay, JA 2003, 'Climate and drought in Australia', in *Beyond Drought: People, policy and perspectives*, L Botterill & M Fisher (eds.), CSIRO Publishing, Collingwood, Vic., pp. 21-48.

Ni Laoire, C. 2001, 'A matter of life and death? Men, masculinities and staying 'Behind' in Rural Ireland', *Sociologia Ruralis*, vol 41, no.2, pp. 220-236.

Raysmith, H 1998, 'Facing the future: Emerging models in community services', *Impact*, May, pp 10-12.

RIRDC & DPIE – see Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) & Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE)

Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation (RIRDC) & Department of Primary Industries and Energy (DPIE) 1998, *Missed opportunities: Harnessing the potential of women in Australian agriculture*, Commonwealth of Australia, Canberra.

Salt, B 1992, *Population movements in non-metropolitan Australia*, Australian Government Publishing Services, Canberra.

Salt, B 2001, *The big shift: Welcome to the Third Australian Culture*, Hardie Grant Books, South Yarra, Victoria.

Society of St Vincent de Paul 1998, *A country crisis: A report on issues confronting rural Victoria*, Melbourne, Victoria.

Stehlik, D, Lawrence, G & Gray, L 2000, 'Gender and drought: Experiences of Australian women in the drought of the 1990s', *Disasters*, vol. 24, no.1, March, pp. 38-53.

Stehlik, D, Gray, I & Lawrence, G 1999, *Drought in the 1990s: Australian farm families' experiences*, Rural Social and Economic Research Centre, Queensland & Centre for Rural Social Research, NSW. Rural Industries Research and Development Corporation, Resilient Agricultural Systems Research and Development. RIRDC Publication No. 99/14. RIRDC Project No. UCQ-5A. RIRDC, Kingston, ACT.

Taylor, J 1999, 'Rural social service provision and competitive tendering: Against the heart', *Rural Social Work*, vol. 4, April, pp. 20-5.

Tonts, M 2000, 'The restructuring of Australia's rural communities', in *Land of Discontent: The dynamics of change in rural and regional Australia*, B Pritchard & P McManus (eds.), UNSW Press, Kensington, pp. 52-72.

Margaret Alston is Professor of Social Work and Human Services and Director of the Centre for Rural Social Research at Charles Sturt University.

Jenny Kent is a Senior Lecturer in the School of Financial Studies at Charles Sturt University.