Forging a New Paradigm for Australian Rural Social Work Practice

by Margaret Alston

Abstract

Rural Australia is in crisis. Decades of restructuring, overlaid with a crippling drought, have left small inland rural areas facing major social problems. Population loss and a decline in service and infrastructure typify rural communities at a time when rural people face increased stress, social isolation and mental health problems. At the same time, federal and state governments have largely turned their backs on rural communities arguing that rural people must become more self-reliant. In this paper, I argue that circumstances demand a commitment from social workers to develop a new model of rural social work, and put forward my ideas about what this model might look like. I invite readers to comment on and contribute to the further development of this model so that social workers might make a contribution to the enhancement and survival of rural communities.

Introduction

The crisis in rural areas has major implications for all Australians. For example, there is evidence of an increasing divide between rural and urban areas, and this threatens our national stability. Equally important are the issues of food security, care of the rural environment and the protection of our heritage. Yet the scale of the crisis is not readily understood by those outside rural communities, due largely to the isolated circumstances of those most affected, despite the widespread media coverage of drought imagery. What is less understood are the effects on people and communities, and the rising levels of rural poverty and social exclusion. What has been occurring over the last two decades is a slow but inexorable process of agricultural destabilisation brought about by globalisation, industrial deregulation, low commodity prices, and widespread restructuring in many small inland communities dependent on agriculture (Gray & Lawrence 2001; NCOSS 2004). The result has been depopulation, the loss of jobs and services, and declining infrastructure leaving ageing rural populations with minimal support in relation to the scale of change they are experiencing.

The situation is exacerbated by a widespread and enduring drought that has affected much of the inland for periods of up to five years (Alston & Kent 2004; Botterill & Fisher 2003). Even prior to the drought, rural people were more likely to be unemployed and on income support, and to have lower education and income levels.
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poorer health, and higher morbidity and mortality rates than the general population (Cheers 1998; Cheers & Taylor 2005; Hugo 2005). Now as a result of the drought, people have lost, or are living on substantially reduced, incomes, with higher levels of debt in the face of a lack of adequate income support. Consequently, they are experiencing significant levels of stress, social isolation, overwork, and other mental health issues with little basic crisis support (Alston & Kent 2004).

Social work has had a low profile in small town rural Australia because social workers tend to be based in regional centres, where most government and larger non-government organisations are located. Consequently, there are few social work designated positions in small rural communities. However, where there are social workers, as in mental health teams in remote towns and in Centrelink’s drought outreach services, they have developed innovative ways of reaching out to clients (Alston & Kent 2004). But for the most part, despite their exceptional work, social workers are not the first port of call for distressed people in small rural communities, who are more likely to go to their local doctor or, if they are farming families, to their rural financial counsellor for help (Alston 1997; Alston & Kent 2004; Alston & Kent in press). Those in dire straits are most likely to seek help from local charities staffed mainly by volunteers (Alston & Kent 2004).

Despite this, I believe that there is a role for social workers, but a new community-based model of service delivery for individuals and families in small rural communities is needed. In this paper, I propose a potential model, drawing on the work of others committed to rural social work practice, in which I advocate a stronger community development and advocacy focus (see for example Briskman 1999; Cheers 1998; Cheers, Darracott & Lonne; Cheers & Taylor 2005; Lynn 1999; Munn & Munn 2003). Readers might well wonder why I see a role for rural social work when it is largely an urban-based profession, which has fallen prey to economic rationalism and lost its focus on broad social issues, political advocacy and social justice.

However, I note that social workers have the multidimensional skills needed to address the complex social issues evident in rural communities. I note also that other rural workers, such as some rural financial counsellors, teachers and other professionals in rural communities, recognise the need for social work skills in their communities (Alston & Kent in press). It is also clearly recognised in the NCOSS (2004) report that we need to maximise existing resources and invest in social work services for rural communities.

Rural communities are often defined as having populations of less than 100,000 people (Black 2005), but many are smaller with communities of less than 20,000. There is a sharp distinction between rural inland and rural coastal regions in that they have been differentially affected by rural restructuring. While many coastal rural regions are experiencing population growth and extraordinary pressures on services and resources, inland areas are facing quite different scenarios as previously outlined. These are the areas most in need of social work services. There are currently 649 rural towns across Australia in this category (Hugo 2005).
Social Work's Suitability for Rural Practice

Social work in Australia is historically a conservative, urban-based, secular profession, and this is reflected in social work education and practice (Archer 2000; Martin 2003). However, beginning in the early 1990s, several Australian universities, located outside the major urban centres, have established social work programs challenging academics to develop practice models and methods that are responsive to their rural contexts. Rural academics have, consequently, developed social work knowledge grounded in local rural experience, providing a healthy discourse on rural social work practice responsive to rural social conditions (Alston 2002; Briskman 1999; Cheers 1998; Cheers & Taylor 2005; Lonne & Cheers 2000; Lynn 1999; Munn & Munn 2003). Much of this discourse is postmodern in nature, privileging the local and emphasising the need to legitimise the voices of marginalised rural people (lfe 2001). However, while the profession has been developing a theory and practice of rural social work, rural services have been lost, reshaped or downgraded through the policies and processes of centralisation (where service management has been pulled back to the cities), regionalisation (where services are run from regional centres), privatisation (where service provision has been outsourced to private providers), and marketisation (where managerialism and user-pay principles have been introduced). As a consequence, there have been major changes in rural welfare provision, and in the staffing of rural services which would employ graduates of rural social work programs. This has disadvantaged rural people who have difficulty accessing even basic health and welfare services, such as maternity care, aged and child care, social work services, general practitioners and medical specialists (Alston & Kent 2004; Alston & Kent in press). Now exacerbated by the prolonged drought and rural restructuring, as mentioned previously, counselling and support services for rural people are almost non-existent. Research conducted with rural non-government services by the New South Wales Council of Social Services reveals significant decreases, delays and withdrawal of key infrastructure or capital, patterns of declining provision and increasing demand, and a significant correlation between the decrease in human service provision over the last five years and an increasing demand for non-government services (NCOSS 2004, p. 3). Thus welfare services have been withdrawn from inland, rural communities at a time of growing need and demand for these services, making it all the more important that an efficient and effective model for rural social work practice be developed so as to maximise available, though diminishing, resources.

Those committed to rural social work actively engage in debates about rural services and the well-being of rural people. They note the urgent need to reassess traditional models of service delivery and social work services in the bush, and to develop a sustainable rural social work practice model that is responsive to the aforementioned socio-economic and political trends and is grounded in local, rural values and culture. It is a culture which challenges the neoliberal ideas currently moulding health and welfare policy, which is imposing further constraints on rural infrastructure and services, and isolating social workers in remote, rural communities.
The Impact of Welfare Reform Policy

While welfare reform policy has changed the human service landscape across Australia, its most critical impact is in rural areas with a low population base. Federal and state governments are pursuing neoliberal policies wherein, through privatisation and contracting for services, non-government organisations have become an essential part of government welfare policy (Cheers & Taylor 2005; Healy & Meagher 2000). For example, privatisation has led to many services, which were previously the responsibility of government, such as unemployment programs, now being run by non-government organisations and, in some communities, the successful tenderers have not necessarily 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 (Cheers & Taylor 2005; Duncombe 1999).

Managerialism and resultant concerns with efficiency and effectiveness have led to a reduced level of servicing, with rural social workers struggling to cover extensive geographical areas and volunteers filling the gaps in the declining rural service infrastructure (Alston 2002; Asthana et al. 2003; Briskman 1999). There is too an uneven distribution of services, with some areas losing services altogether and others having multiple service providers (Alston & Kent 2001). The tendering process privileges large organisations, while smaller rural organisations compete against one another, or are forced to throw in their lot with larger service providers who do not necessarily share their service ethos. The result has been increased bureaucratisation, over-stretched services and disempowered service users (Lyons, 2000).

Those on the left critique these policies as being individualistic, placing a greater burden of self-reliance on already disadvantaged rural families and communities (Botterill 2003; Gray & Lawrence 2001; Rees 1995). For them, the National Competition Policy, introduced as the basis for service allocation in 1996, has shifted the cost burden to rural communities, created distrust, placed extra pressure on volunteer management committee members, and transferred ownership and control of service development out of the community's control (Cheers & Taylor 2005). It has also resulted in a lack of transparency in commercial-confidence agreements reached with organisations (Lynn 1999), competition between service providers, and lower levels of participation of community members in service organisations due to the user pays system and financial hardship. Further, performance-based outcome measures have reduced the ability of services to engage in community development, advocacy and planning. Instead they have shifted the service focus to individuals and families rather than communities, and they have transferred the responsibility for service delivery from local government to Commonwealth and State agencies, with a resultant lack of regard for local, rural culture, and a haphazard rather than a holistic welfare system (Cheers & Taylor 2005). How then can social workers address the critical impact of welfare reform in rural communities?

A New Model for Rural Social Work Practice

Social work has a universal vision of social justice and empowerment (Camillert 1999), which requires an ability to effectively negotiate power
relationships (Healy 1999) and develop "entrepreneurial projects" (Hough 1999, p. 52). The challenge for rural social workers is to reshape practice within a system which prioritises economic goals, so that their professional ideals of social justice and human rights can lead to the attainment of social objectives. Social workers work with marginalised groups in society, drawing the attention of policy-makers to rural conditions and advocating for access to and equity in service delivery. This is why social workers are needed in rural areas, and why it is imperative to devise a new model of rural service delivery which maximises scarce resources. Such a model needs to be embedded in the community, and draw on its existing strengths, networks and infrastructure (Cheers & Taylor 2005). Thus the community is where we must begin to find the building blocks on which to develop the model. There we find several positive features of rural communities that are either underutilised, well-resourced or able to be built on in some way. For example, most communities are part of a local government or shire area and have local government infrastructure. They have at least one school and/or a small hospital, a department of agriculture office, a financial counsellor, and a network of skilled people, like the local clergy and local service clubs.

I envisage this model resting on a new funding environment set up by federal and state governments to provide social development funding into rural communities. Communities would then tender for funding to provide social support mechanisms. The participation of the local community is essential, and one way to approach this is to invite community members to form a social development council, which could then tender for funding to establish a holistic local rural social development service. With adequate resourcing, such a service could employ a social worker to work alongside rural financial counsellors in Department of Agriculture offices, and deliver much needed social and emotional counselling. A social worker could also be based in the local school doing community work, reaching out into the community, networking with departments of education, family and community services, and health. A social worker might be based in the local hospital providing a coordinating and development role in health and welfare, or co-located in a local government office engaged in social planning and community work.

The model would require that federal and state governments work together to resource, plan, develop and support social workers and rural communities in the joint social development council. Organisations with the capacity to provide such support include the Department of Transport and Regional Services, the Department of Education, Science and Technology, and Centrelink. Importantly, to retain rural social workers, adequate professional supervision and support needs to be provided by the lead agency responsible for assessing applications from rural social development committees, resourcing successful bids, and supervising and networking workers. The local social development committees would have an ongoing role in providing support and advice to the workers and liaising with the lead agency. In this way, local ownership and community embeddedness would continue, and existing support networks and community organisations and workers would be empowered. Social workers would be locally grounded, community-based, and engage in community development, advocacy, networking, planning, and support to rural communities.
The Australian Association of Social Workers and the Council of the Heads of Australian Social Work Schools could form a sub-committee to work on refining and promoting the model and advocating its enactment. Additionally, it must be effectively resourced, adequately planned and coordinated, allow for the protection of confidentiality, be flexible, enable outreach, be based on collaboration rather than competition, be transparent, managed and applied locally, empower local people, provide optimal levels of supervision and professional development opportunities for workers, and work in partnership with other services (Briskman 1999; Collingridge 1991; Stayner & Barclay 2002).

Conclusion

Rural Australia is in crisis - drought continues across the inland and rural restructuring is ongoing. At the same time, public welfare services and notably social workers are absent in small town rural Australia. A new model for rural social work practice is suggested in which social workers play a pivotal role in responding to local rural needs, drawing on the unique strengths of rural people and communities, providing leadership, policy advice, counselling, community development, advocacy, social planning and project management. Such a model offers the possibility of pursuing social goals while moving away from a welfare reform policy framework, which values economic objectives like increased competition, managerialism, market prioritisation, privatisation, and user-pay systems. It would strengthen and support people who choose to live in rural areas, and is achievable, culturally appropriate and locally based. It can empower communities to tender for funding and to take ownership of projects aimed at individual, family and community well-being. I invite comments from others in order to further develop the model and to assess its usefulness.

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NCOSS – see New South Wales Council of Social Services


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