The emergence of water markets in Australia and implications for rural social work

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ABSTRACT. The aim of this paper is to consider the implications for rural social work practice of the widespread and severe drought coupled with the emergence of water markets in Australia. The National Water Initiative was signed at the June 2004 Council of Australian Governments meeting with the aim of producing a nationally-compatible, market, regulatory and planning-based system of managing water resources to optimise economic, social and environmental outcomes. The National Water Commission and the National Competition Council have since assessed progress on the implementation of the initiative: none of their reports gives adequate consideration to the impact of water reform on rural communities. In this paper, we draw upon previous research and written submissions made to the Commission and the Council to examine the social and political consequences of the drought and the emergence of water markets. We discuss the implications for rural practice, and conclude by proposing seven recommendations to assert the role of rural social workers as change agents. This role could encompass community education and advocacy, piloting schemes such as community water banks, reinstating community development in social work curriculum, and facilitating collaborative rural partnerships.

Introduction

National Competition Policy (NCP) has arguably been the single most influential policy that has shaped economic and social conditions throughout Australia over the last ten years (National Competition Council, 1999, 2004). Its impact has probably been felt most acutely in rural and regional areas (Productivity Commission, 1999a, 1999b, 2005a). NCP comprises a set of reforms agreed to by Commonwealth, State and Territory governments in 1995. It is coordinated through the Council of Australian Governments (CoAG). The NCP covers the Competition Policy Reform Act, the Conduct Code Agreement, the Competition Principles Agreement and the Public Interest Test, and the Agreement to Implement the National Competition Policy and Related Reforms. These reforms are based upon a neo-liberal ideology that stimulating economic competition will promote greater productivity which will benefit consumers and ultimately lead to an enhancement of material well-being for Australia (Productivity Commission, 2005).

NCP limits anti-competitive conduct, requires governments to amend all legislation relating to competition law and to apply an agreed set of competition principles to all activities. In return, the states and territories receive regular, substantial tranche payments (up to several hundred million dollars each year) from the Federal Government for implementing these reforms. Over the past ten years, Australian governments have been stridently implementing NCP (National Competition Council, 2004). Privatisation and outsourcing has occurred in public utilities and services including gas, electricity, public transport, education, health, and telecommunications. Many local and state government services have been outsourced. Competition has also been injected into ‘previously sheltered areas of the economy’ (National Competition Council, 1999, p. 5). Today, almost every sector, industry, business, profession and service in this land has been affected by NCP. A recent review of microeconomic reform in Australia compared to other OECD countries concluded that ‘Australia has been at the forefront of..."
competition reform initiatives, or at least on a par with selected OECD counterparts’ (National Competition Council, 2004, p. 7).

The cumulative impact of these reforms on rural and regional Australia is hotly contested. Two major inquiries on NCP were commissioned in 1998: a Senate inquiry into the socio-economic consequences (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1999, 2000), and a Productivity Commission (1999a, 1999b, 1999c) investigation into the impact of NCP on rural and regional Australia. The regional impacts of NCP are also considered in regular reviews of NCP reforms (Productivity Commission, 2005a). On the one hand, the Productivity Commission argues that NCP has ‘delivered substantial benefits to the Australian community which, overall, have greatly outweighed the costs’ (Productivity Commission, 2005a, p. xii). The population drain to major regional towns and cities and rural economic downturn are due, the Commission argues, to pre-existing and long-term structural changes. The Commission acknowledges that NCP has adversely affected particular individuals and some smaller rural communities, but recently concluded that ‘it is hard to sustain a case that the social, regional, or environmental impacts of NCP have been generally detrimental’ (2005a, p. 123).

By contrast, there is compelling evidence from a host of independent researchers (see, for example, Ernst, Glanville and Murfitt, 1997; Hallebone, Townsend and Mahoney, 2000; Madden, 2000; Taylor, 1999) and submissions to the Senate inquiry (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2000) that NCP has worked in favour of metropolitan areas and has disadvantaged many parts of regional Australia. NCP has hastened the economic decline of many rural industries, eroded vital services such as banking, forced the closure of businesses and the rationalisation and privatisation of key government services in rural areas, curtailed local autonomy, and undermined social capital. The Senate inquiry concluded that the effect of reforms on rural and regional areas is a ‘serious issue’ and that country areas do ‘not have the capacity to quickly adjust or absorb the changes which those policies can generate, such as unemployment’ (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia, 2000, p. 85). There seems to be general agreement that NCP is not solely to blame for these trends; rather, it is accelerating the rate of decline.

Water is now being increasingly targeted for competition reform. For more than a decade, the Council of Australian Governments has embarked on a program of national reform of the water sector. The 1994 Water Reform Framework and subsequent initiatives have reformed pricing structures (for example, charging water according to the volume used rather than the rate valuation of a property), the creation of water entitlements separate from land titles, the opening up of water trading markets, the statutory recognition of the allocation of water for environmental uses, and the separation of water resource management from service provision (Intergovernmental Agreement on National Water Initiative, 2004; National Competition Council, 2004). The National Water Initiative aims, among other things, to complete the process of the marketisation of water. A key objective is the progressive removal of barriers to trade in water and meeting other requirements to facilitate the broadening and deepening of the water market, with an open trading market to be in place’ (Intergovernmental Agreement on National Water Initiative, 2004, p. 4).

The Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet released a Discussion Paper on the Role of the Private Sector in the Supply of Water and Wastewater Services (2006). The paper argues that many other sectors benefit from increased competition and private sector involvement. The agenda is clear: to open up the water sector for privatisation. The Business Council of Australia’s (BCA) position paper Water Under Pressure: Australia’s man-made water scarcity and how to fix it (2006) strongly endorses the government’s line. The BCA says that problems and shortages with water supply are a ‘major brake on economic growth’ and recommends the introduction of competition and private investment into water management, together with a dramatic expansion of water trading.

The further encroachment of competition and privatisation into the water sector has notable consequences for rural and regional Australia: the vast majority of Australia’s water is harvested in rural catchments; some 70% of all water use is for agricultural purposes; many hundreds of rural communities are now in ‘Exceptional Circumstances’ due to the prolonged, severe...
drought affecting much of south-eastern Australia; and water is life-giving – it is essential for the environmental sustainability of the country.

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) reminds us that developments such as these are relevant to the social work profession because changes to the natural environment, through drought, climate change and environmental degradation affect ‘the ability of people and communities to achieve their potential as human beings and to give expression to their human rights’ (IFSW, 2000, p. 4). For rural social workers in Australia, then, these developments prompt the following questions:

1. What is the nature of the relationship between rural communities and water?
2. What are the social and political consequences for rural communities of the prolonged drought and the marketisation of water?
3. What are the implications for rural social work and community practice?
4. What are the recommendations for rural social workers in response to changing water markets?

1. What is the nature of the relationship between rural communities and water?

The impact of water reforms will be felt across all Australia, but will be most profoundly experienced in rural Australia where water is inextricably linked to the physical and economic survival of individuals and their community. Historically, agriculture plays a significant role in Australia’s economy and, despite its steady decline over the last few decades, the industry is still strongly linked to the Australian economy (Productivity Commission, 2005b). Notably, the agricultural industry contributes between 4% and 6% of Australia’s GDP or $25 billion to the economy; provides 5% of Australian investment effort and, in 2003-04, accounted for approximately 22% of Australia’s total goods and service exports (Productivity Commission, 2005b). Notably, the agricultural industry contributes between 4% and 6% of Australia’s GDP or $25 billion to the economy; provides 5% of Australian investment effort and, in 2003-04, accounted for approximately 22% of Australia’s total goods and service exports (Productivity Commission, 2005b). Notably, the agricultural industry contributes between 4% and 6% of Australia’s GDP or $25 billion to the economy; provides 5% of Australian investment effort and, in 2003-04, accounted for approximately 22% of Australia’s total goods and service exports (Productivity Commission, 2005b). Notably, the agricultural industry contributes between 4% and 6% of Australia’s GDP or $25 billion to the economy; provides 5% of Australian investment effort and, in 2003-04, accounted for approximately 22% of Australia’s total goods and service exports (Productivity Commission, 2005b).

Changes to water markets are coming at a time of considerable upheaval for the Australian agricultural industry, having experienced significant decline in the last few decades. In the 20 years to 2002-03, farm numbers decreased by 25% (46,000 farms); land for agriculture declined by 9%; farm sizes increased 23% from an average 2720 to 3340 hectares; and the number of small farms and farms with an operational value of $100,000 or less has declined, resulting in an increase in medium sized farms and farms with an operational value of over $500,000 (Productivity Commission, 2005b). Farm numbers in Australia are decreasing by approximately 2% a year (Pritchard, 2002). The reduced number of farms, coupled with the shift from smaller to medium size farms, has prompted speculation that the once strong bond between farmers and their local communities is waning. Pritchard (2002) highlights the negative impact that changes to farming has had on local communities with an example from central west New South Wales (NSW) where tractor dealerships have declined by almost half, between 1981 (n = 64) and 2001 (n = 34). This represents two confounding factors: the shift from single owner-operator businesses to larger franchisees, and the capacity for larger farms to purchase equipment over the internet and from larger towns and centres, thus avoiding the need to purchase equipment from local dealerships (Pritchard, 2002).

How, then, do rural communities - many of which are already facing significant change, or are soon to experience significant change
to their water supply - successfully effect and manage the change? Theoretical approaches and concepts, some with a strong grounding in social work theory and practice (e.g., community development approaches) have been encouraged and embraced by Australian government and non-government organisations. We suggest that these ideas could also be used effectively in communities facing changes to their water supply. An outline of possible approaches follows.

Community engagement as a strategy for managing change has been defined as ‘a vehicle that can be used (by governments and other stakeholders) to build more resilient relationships with community. It can lead to the identification of mechanisms for building a community’s strengths’ (Victorian Government Department of Sustainability and Environment, 2005, p. 3). Community engagement can provide a practical means of producing community change through democratic processes (Rubin & Rubin, 2001). Similarly, harnessing and building social capital – another approach or concept for community organising – places strong emphasis on how people connect with one another (Putnam, 1993). According to Cox (2000) social capital has the potential to provide communities with a foundation for coping with change: ‘the resilience and capacities of communities to manage their relationships, both inside and out, in times when change is endemic’ (Cox, 2000, p. 103). It has also been identified as having all the elements essential for sustainability (Cocklin & Alston, 2003, p. 207). Projects that are seen to be successful, and sustainable, need to incorporate local solutions, provide outlets for people to become involved, and an awareness of local history (Falk, 2001b).

Other strategies for developing community capacity to manage change include community building and community leadership approaches. Community building incorporates elements of the social capital approach and has been widely embraced by federal and state governments in Australia (for example, Department of Human Services, 2001; Office of Community Building, 2003). The neighborhood renewal programs which operate in communities in Victoria have sought to redress disadvantage by increasing people’s pride and participation in their community (Department of Human Services, 2003). The method of community building can be minimalist, where community building is left to the communities themselves (Department of Family and Community Services, 2001), or it can be a more guided approach where skills training, resources and support are made available to the community (Office of Community Building, 2003). Irrespective of the approach, involving business and community leaders in the process is an integral component to its success. Community leadership is another component of community building and is a key factor in facilitating community change by promoting activities such as education or leadership training, for particular groups, including women and young people.

There is a growing literature discussing engagement with rural communities that are facing decline, change and restructure. Some of the factors to consider for any community facilitator involved in this process are the emotional and affective connections that people have within their communities. Initiating community change is also more effective when the facilitator/s come from within the community itself. Cheers (1998), for example, suggests that effective community-orientated practice occurs when the worker is embedded within the community. Similarly, Kingma and Falk (2001a) suggest that for some change processes, a community worker may provide the catalyst to foster trust and social cohesion. In a study of Shepparton and the Latrobe Valley in Victoria (Gibson et al., 1999), researchers found that some of the elements that impacted upon rural communities undergoing change were social polarization, insecurity of employment and decrease in social networks. Their change process involved emphasizing the strengths and assets of the community in a social capital-type approach.

In a study that shares some parallels with the anticipated changes of rural communities in light of water reforms, Jennings (2002) studied the impact of bank closures in rural communities and conceptualized a self-development approach. The successful features of this approach included people’s affirmation as significant members of their community, establishing an acceptable and achievable family vision and open communication. A history of achieving joint community goals was a significant factor leading to success in this study.

It is these approaches that may assist rural communities adjust to changes in state
government water privatisation laws. Indeed some of these approaches have already been embraced or earmarked for use in rural, drought-affected communities. For example, a recent conference held in NSW for representatives from health, agricultural, and community organisations identified community building and education as one of three identified strategies to minimise the mental health problems for individuals in (potentially) drought-affected areas in rural Australia (Sartore et al., 2005). Similarly, the NSW Farmers Association also recognizes the importance of community building. In a study they conducted into the challenges facing rural communities in NSW, they found ‘that strong and effective leadership is a vitally important ingredient in encouraging innovation and local entrepreneurship, resulting in growth and development’ (NSW Farmers Association, 2006). In 2005/06, the rural affairs team for the NSW Farmers Association intended to focus on positive outcomes in areas such as building rural communities and releasing the ‘Building Communities’ discussion paper (NSW Farmers Association, 2006). Initiatives such as these, and the evidence presented to date, highlight the significant role of water in rural communities as a means of both personal and economic survival and success. However, the social and political consequences of prolonged drought and impending change to water markets need careful consideration. A brief discussion of these concerns follows.

2. What are the social and political consequences for rural communities of the prolonged drought and the marketisation of water?

The impact of drought in recent years, in addition to the overall decline of the agricultural industry and changes to the global agricultural markets, provides evidence of the vulnerability of rural Australia (Pritchard, 2002) and highlights the importance that natural resources – particularly water – has on this industry. Not only does drought have a detrimental impact on agricultural output, but it also affects employment and exports (Productivity Commission, 2005b), and has social and political consequences. For example, the 2002–03 drought slashed 70,000 agricultural jobs and saw agricultural exports fall by 23% between June 2002 and June 2003 (Productivity Commission, 2005b). Changes to water reform and the privatisation of water markets could be the last straw for many farmers who are already struggling. In May 2006, 62% of NSW was officially drought declared – a figure that is triple what it was in the 6 months prior to May (NSW Farmers Association, 2006). The pattern of dry weather and drought is similar in most States and Territories across Australia, many of which are experiencing the driest conditions on record and are areas listed for ‘exceptional circumstance’ government drought assistance (see Australian Government, Department of Agriculture, Fisheries and Forestry, 2006).

There is evidence that the availability – or lack – of natural resources can affect the psychological health of individuals, and communities, in rural Australia. This is evident where water is intrinsically linked to economic survival, such as farming. The levels of suicide for Australian male farmers for example are higher in comparison to both the national average and other rural populations (Page & Fragar, 2002, cited in Sartore, Hoolahan, Tonn, Kelly & Stain, 2005). It has been suggested that the unique characteristics of farming and the stressors (including economic difficulties) associated with it may have a negative impact on the mental health of farmers (Fraser et al., 2005). A recent study by Mahoney and Blau (2006) identified a range of impacts that drought has on the mental and physical health of farmers, their partners and families, and suggests such impacts can affect social and community health, sometimes resulting in reduced social cohesion and community resilience. Under these circumstances, where agriculture is undergoing significant change - such as water privatisation and long-term drought - that the health, social and economic impact of change on rural communities will be most damaging.

While the full impact of water markets on communities is somewhat speculative, anecdotal evidence suggests that proposed changes to water markets will have a detrimental effect on small, family owned farms. Already stories are surfacing about farmers being pressured to sell their water rights to meet bank loans. For example, some fruit and citrus growers and wine grape growers in the Murray and Goulburn irrigation schemes are selling water to access more money. In doing so, many are left with
inoperable, and in some cases unsaleable, farms (Egan & Koutsoukis, 2006a). According to Danny Lee, Chairman of the Sunraysia Irrigation Council, 150 families have been forced to sell their water rights to stave off debt such as bank loans, payments for fruit pickers and to keep their farms afloat (Egan & Koutsoukis, 2006). Furthermore, landowners are selling their properties and moving because of concern over water market changes. This, in turn, has had a detrimental effect on smaller rural community numbers which are declining (Egan & Koutsoukis, 2006b).

In the past, changes to water markets have raised concerns about the difficulties experienced by banking markets and irrigators and presents yet another layer of complexity to this situation (Willett, 2001). Specifically, water has traditionally represented 70% of the value of a farming property. Therefore, changes to a property’s water allocation may affect property prices as determined by irrigators and bankers. This may cause uncertainty and concern in managing on-going credit, and may increase concerns over market uncertainty and risk leading to increases in premiums (Willett, 2001).

Other stakeholders will also be affected. Changes to water markets and water flow can have an impact on individuals and communities that derive income from aquatic environments, including tourist providers, fisheries, river boat owners and communities reliant on rivers to obtain their drinking water reserves (Productivity Commission, 2006).

The evidence to date raises considerable concerns about the consequences for rural communities that derive economic survival from industries which are reliant on water. What then, will be the implications for social work practices in rural communities facing significant environmental change, and what can be done to respond to the impending changes? The following section will examine these questions.

3. What are the implications for rural social work and community practice?

The social work profession has been slow to assert a role in environmental politics or indeed broader rural policy issues in Australia. Rural health and welfare professionals have, in the main, restricted their interest to matters directly affecting practice and service provision, evidenced in a list of priority issues for the work of the National Rural Health Alliance (NRHA), where ‘housing, water, nutrition and food supply in rural and remote areas’ is listed last at number 27 (National Rural Health Alliance, 2006a). The NRHA has begun to turn its attention to the health impacts of climate change and is seeking assurances from governments that rural service provision will not be further reduced (National Rural Health Alliance, 2006b, p. 24).

In defence of rural social workers, it must be said that the rural workforce is small and under-resourcing and withdrawal of services has rendered the workload overwhelming, coupled with travel demands and professional isolation. Those social workers engaged in rural work find it very satisfying provided they have support, and they have a strong sense of belonging in their communities (Cheers, 1998; Lonne & Cheers, 2000, 2004). In this sense they can be powerful agents of social change.

An exploration of social work theory can contribute to thinking about how changes in water use are managed. For example, one of the major social work practice approaches, the ecological perspective, suggests that all aspects of the individual’s environment, including the natural environment, should be taken into account in the helping process (for example, Germain & Gitterman, 1996; Mattaini & Meyer, 2002). Environmental issues, including access to water, have been seen in the context of human rights. Ife (2001) includes the physical environment when he argues for a holistic view of community development, defining environmental development as an approach that:

asserts that a sense of place and a connectedness to our physical environment are essential to human wellbeing, and seeks to integrate environmental protection and development within a broader community development structure. (Ife, 2001, p. 40-41)

This suggests that changes in resource allocation driven by economics, such as water trading, and changes in the natural environment, should be considered legitimate issues for social workers and community workers offering services to rural people in Australia. We would argue that social workers are well placed to be at the forefront in managing such rural community change.
Social workers and community development practitioners, however, may be excluded from debate and action on matters such as water trading because the arena tends to be dominated by technical experts. We contend that environmental issues need also to be seen in their social and political contexts, and in that sense they concern the whole community (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006). Decisions about water need to be decisions that are open and transparent. Rural people in Australia have already experienced service withdrawal and exclusion from decisions affecting them (Hallebone et al., 2000). When debates about water allocation are conducted in Canberra, the boardrooms of capital cities, or indeed in an international location, local people are again excluded from decision-making about the future of their communities (Alston, 2005a; Swyngedouw, 2004).

Starting with an ecological perspective, and motivated by a commitment to human rights, where change in the environment is seen as one aspect of an integrated approach to community development, social workers are skilled in negotiating and managing community decision-making in rural communities. A concern for the environment, it is argued, can be ‘a way of bringing people together in a relatively non-threatening way’ (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006, p. 243). Solutions that are owned by the community after thorough and inclusive processes of debate and decision-making, will be more effective than ‘the technical solutions demanded by the scientific technological paradigm’ (Ife & Tesoriero, 2006, p. 244). Working in partnership with environmental scientists and technical experts, social and community workers can ensure that the complex social nature of environmental and economic change can be properly addressed.

This way of working is congruent with the social work tradition of community work. Ife (2000, p. 147) argues that, in order to operate in an increasingly globalised world, social work will need to ‘move away from the more conventional paradigm of individualized professional services’. Similarly, Lynn (2004) offers a description of community development that is relevant for rural practice:

Community development normalizes individuals’ concerns by contextualising them in the community and respecting them as issues worthy of attention and action, rather than addressing them as individually sourced problems (Lynn, 2004, p. 240-241).

We now turn to consider how drought and water trading developments will affect service delivery in rural Australia.

**Implications for rural service delivery**

Community services in rural Australia are based in regional cities and larger towns, often auspiced by large organizations based, in many cases, in capital cities. Recruitment and retention of rural professionals is a constant challenge for service-providing organizations, including those agencies seeking to employ social workers (Lonne & Cheers, 2004). There is little empirical research so far on rural social work and community practice in Australia, but we know that individual and family work tends to dominate social work in Australia generally (Lonne & Cheers, 2000), and therefore, as Cheers (1998, p. 176) argues ‘many social workers are ill-equipped to contribute to regional planning, social planning or community development’. Despite this, there is evidence that rural workers engage in rural community work, whether or not this is part of their job role, and due to their connectedness and ‘embeddedness’ (Cheers, 1998; 1999) in their communities. In a study of Australian rural women-specific services, for example, community education work was more prevalent than in city services, and workers in rural areas were more actively engaged in community activism than were their urban counterparts (Mason, 2004).

A recently established model of rural practice is the rural financial counselling service set up in response to prolonged drought in Australia’s rangelands. In a study of the social impact of drought, Alston and Kent (2004) found this model to be well used and accessible. Drought counsellors, however, needed support to manage the emotional burdens they faced, and the authors suggest that social workers need to be co-located with counsellors to provide that support and to co-ordinate referrals to other services. A study in Western Australia found an unmet need for counsellors in rural areas of that State, especially in the area of mental health (Sherwood, 2000). The emphasis placed by these authors on individual counselling practice is no doubt supported by concerns about increasing mental health problems, the incidence of depression and the stress of family conflict reported in rural
areas. We are concerned, however, that investment in counselling and psychotherapeutic social work approaches, on their own, will not address the structural issues facing rural people, especially in the area of water marketing.

In their recommendations, Alston and Kent (2004) suggest that any new service established in rural areas needs to appreciate the barriers rural people face when seeking help, including pride, fears about confidentiality and stigma, as well as access issues including distance and cost. They argue that providers must have ‘an understanding of the rural ethos’ and ‘be part of the community’ (Alston & Kent, 2004, p. 109). A service addressing the impact of water markets on rural communities would need to take these factors into account. Furthermore, we would recommend including service objectives that engage the whole community in social action to increase community control over decisions affecting wellbeing. In this sense, the social work and community work role incorporates a structural approach, taking into account factors in the broader social and political environment, as well as attention to the individuals concerned. This is, after all, true to, and an extension of, the principles of an ecological approach and encompasses the core of what social workers are trained to do; roles that allow for this integrated practice approach are also eminently more satisfying, and indeed more relevant to the rural milieu (Cheers, 1998; Green, 2003a; Lynn, 1990). We agree with Margaret Alston (2005b) who argues that this approach, with a focus on community development and advocacy, should be seen as the new paradigm for rural social work in Australia.

One model we would like to consider draws on the community bank scheme auspiced by Bendigo Bank. Could the same principles of community ownership be applied in the case of water trading? Rather than see powerful global players dictating their future, could members of local communities, with strong leadership, advocacy and empowering skill transfer from rural community workers and leaders, stake a claim in the future by becoming active players in water markets? Rural people are not averse to collective solutions; dairy and fruit co-operatives, owned and operated by producers and growers, are successful examples of community ownership. Communities facing crisis may be well advised to consider a new way of addressing the future, couched in terms of community ownership and building on existing social capital. Community awareness-raising projects about water issues may be a starting point in this process. The Watermark Australia Project, for example, spearheaded by the Victorian Women's Trust (www.watermarkaustralia.org.au), uses a small group discussion model to build a community statement or vision about the future management of water resources. Rural social workers, skilled in ‘reading’ communities, facilitating community debate and engaging people across social divides, would be ideally placed to lead such campaigns. In order to implement ideas of this kind, innovative ways of employing and resourcing rural social workers will need to be developed, using the assets of rural towns such as the health service, local government, schools, primary industry support and state and federal government departments, requiring local, state and federal government co-operation (Alston 2005b).

Implications for rural social work education
If rural social workers are to address pressing social concerns such as drought, water use and rural re-adjustment, they must be equipped with relevant knowledge and skill in their pre-service courses. Knowledge and skill specific to rural social work practice is rarely taught in social work curricula (Green, 2003b), although there is anecdotal evidence that those engaged in teaching rural students are using examples from rural practice to illustrate relevant issues. In teaching social work, the theory and practice of advocacy and empowerment, and the range of community practices, would seem to be the most relevant areas for emphasis if we are to forge the new rural social work paradigm (Alston, 2005b). According to Payne (2005, p. 295), advocacy and empowerment ‘are connected with self-help and the participation of individuals and communities in decisions that affect them’. This approach recognises

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2 The Bendigo Bank, in response to wholesale bank closures in Australia from 1993, devised a Community Bank scheme, where local communities own and operate a branch. Local people raise funds to start the operation, which is then staffed and managed by the Bendigo Bank. Profits are reinvested into the local community (www.bendigobank.com.au/community_bank, accessed 8 October 2006).
power differentials, class and oppression in communities as barriers to be overcome if people are to achieve their objectives. Empowerment and advocacy ‘are supported by some evidence of the effectiveness of group methods that promote solidarity and consciousness-raising’ (Payne, 2005, p. 314). Advocacy, according to O’Hara and Weber (2006), can be seen from a rights perspective or an empowerment perspective. In the former, it is concerned with securing people’s rights, working in partnership with service users, and minimising barriers to participation. From an empowerment perspective, advocacy provides information and resources to service users to assist them to make decisions and assume responsibility.

Coupled with an understanding of the theory and practice of advocacy and empowerment, mastery of community work practice is also required by rural social work graduates if major rural social issues are to be meaningfully addressed. One approach that is relevant to rural communities facing change is Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD), linked to the strengths perspective in direct practice (O’Hara & Weber, 2006). The four principles of ABCD are listed as follows:

• change must begin from inside the community;
• change must build on the capacities and assets that already exist within communities;
• change is relationship driven; and,
• change should be oriented towards sustainable community growth (O’Hara & Weber, 2006, p. 249-250).

These practice methods, we believe, are more relevant to address the challenges that arise for rural communities facing changes in water allocation, than individualised counselling and casework practices alone, effective as these may be for the individuals concerned.3 The private and confessional nature of direct social work practice approaches, such as counselling, will not have an immediate impact on the structural problems facing rural communities. These methods may, instead, contribute to the privatisation of problems and the stifling of community debate about important social issues. Rural social workers need to graduate equipped with the know-how to work with individuals, families, groups and communities in a rural-aware way, recognising and making use of rural community strengths, and facilitating community-driven solutions. They also need to approach so-called ‘technical’ areas, such as rural water trading and environmental economics, as legitimate areas for social work involvement.

In this paper we have reviewed the impact of NCP on rural communities, and, more specifically, on the rural water sector. We have addressed the nature of the relationship between rural communities and water, explored the social and political consequences for rural Australia of drought and competition in water, and offered some ideas about the implications for rural social work and community practice and education. We now offer a series of recommendations to implement our findings.

4. What are the recommendations for rural social workers in response to changing water markets?

In order to address the challenges presented by National Competition Policy and the emergence of water markets, coupled with prolonged drought and continuing rural decline, we propose a series of recommendations that will assert the role of rural social workers as change agents. We welcome debate about the feasibility and viability of these strategies.

Water banking: We would like to see a community water banking scheme piloted in a rural community. A local government authority, economic development committee or service club might take the lead in opening up discussion of this idea.

Investment in community building: We recommend that government and private funding be directed towards projects that will build community capacity, along the lines of the ABCD approach outlined above. Urban renewal programs in cities and regional towns have increased residents’ involvement in decision-making about their communities and could be usefully adapted to the small rural context.

Structural solutions: Community service agencies and rural lobby groups should advocate for a focus on structural service responses, rather than more individualised

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3 Landline (ABC 12 November 2006) reported from a meeting of farmers in South Australia that they saw a government offer of mental health counselling as insulting, when what they wanted was financial assistance.
services. Rural agencies should be encouraged to employ social workers in community development positions, where they can bring together people and systems and empower local networks. More counsellors will not solve the underlying structural challenges facing rural communities.

Decision-making: Communities should be included and represented when decisions are made about water. Social workers could have a valuable role in educating communities about the public interest test in National Competition Policy, and how to make community voices heard through legislative reviews (Tito, 2001).

Social work curriculum: Community development in all its forms must return to the centre of the social work curriculum. There has been a trend to downgrade community work content in social work courses and this needs to be reversed (Dixon & Hoatson, 1999). Education for rural practice needs to take account of specific factors that apply to rural communities (Chenoweth, 2004).

Funding, projects and partnerships: Universities, especially in regional Australia, should explore the potential for collaborative research projects with rural communities to learn more about community ownership and management of water resources. Funding may be available through formal research funding sources, private philanthropy, specialist advocacy centres such as the Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre in Victoria\(^4\), or non-profit agricultural research bodies, such as the Birchip Cropping Group in Victoria (www.bcg.org.au). The University of Melbourne, for example, is hosting research fellowships in rural and water issues (The Australian, 2006).

Education about water: Finally, we recommend that social work curricula include attention to the central role of water in Australia’s economic and social life, so that social workers will include consideration of water issues in the sweep of rural and urban community challenges that they see as legitimate territory for work.

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\(^4\) The Consumer Utilities Advocacy Centre (CUAC) ‘provides an independent, proactive and informed advocacy voice on electricity, gas and water issues for Victorian consumers, particularly low-income, rural and disadvantaged consumers’ (CUAC 2006, p. 1).

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