

## **REVISITING THE 1986-7 'STUDY OF SMALL TOWNS IN VICTORIA': HOW THEORY AND METHOD IN TOWN STUDIES HAVE CHANGED OVER THE LAST TWO DECADES**

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**ABSTRACT:** Small towns throughout Australia are undergoing significant change as their populations' age and decline and agriculture restructures into larger, corporate owned businesses reporting to managers in other places. Understanding the role these towns play in rural regional development is essential for governments who introduce community capacity building and other innovation solutions designed to assist such communities cope with change. This paper will report on a Victorian study where members of the Victorian Universities Regional Research Network (VURRN) returned to six small towns that were subject to a major study of their changing circumstances and future challenges in the mid 1980s. The VURRN members were joined by the author of the original study, John Henshall, and were supported by staff from the departments of Sustainability and Environment and Victorian Communities in order to understand how the State Government's community capacity building initiatives had impacted these communities. It discusses the methodological assumptions reflected in the Henshall Hansen and Associates study compared with previous and contemporary approaches to understanding small town change and its impact on rural regional development.

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

This paper reflects on the approach the author and his colleagues in the Victorian Universities Regional Research Network VURRN, and John Henshall from Essential Economics, are using in their study revisiting six towns studied in the mid 1980s by Henshall Hansen and Associates (1988), reported in *Study of Small Towns in Victoria*. That study used a combination of socio-economic and other data analysis for each town as well as a series of interviews with people in these places who represented local institutions and the various economic, social and cultural activities in these places to identify the issues facing each place and to assist the State government of the day develop policies and programs to assist rural Victoria.<sup>1</sup> Their report has been in continuous demand since publication.<sup>2</sup>

Australian small towns have been subject to research and investigation by scholars and consultants over an extended period. Academic examples include McIntyre and McIntyre (1944), Oeser and Emery (1954), Wild (1974), Oxley (1978), Bowman (1981), Poiner (1990) and Ploughman (2003). Depending on the intellectual frameworks of their respective disciplines these researchers follow predictable methods in their inquiry. Other studies of rural issues using the country town as its focus, such as the impact of drought on these places have

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<sup>1</sup> The REV or Regional Employment Victoria Program was a direct result of this study.

<sup>2</sup> Personal communication John Henshall.

also used research methods reflecting the aims of their enquiry (see Gregory, 1984; CREEDA Projects, 2004). We will briefly review the approach taken in these earlier academic town studies and review two contemporary Canadian studies which we regard as comprehensive in providing a good understanding of the structure and function of country towns before outlining the approach taken in the Henshall Hansen and Associates (1988) study and the methods we are using in our follow-up to this study. Our purpose in this paper is to identify the most appropriate methods of inquiry into the structure and function of Australian country towns. Specifically, what is the most appropriate suite of research methods to gain a comprehensive understanding of the sustainability of these places in a dynamic and ever changing global context? Why is this important? As Sher and Sher (1994) reminded us with their telling expose of Australia's approach to rural development, country towns are a vital link between rural and urban Australians in terms of our social and cultural history (also see Waterhouse, 2005) and economic future.

## 2. ACADEMIC STUDIES OF AUSTRALIAN COUNTRY TOWNS

### 2.1 McIntyre and McIntyre (1944)

One of the earliest 'community studies' of country towns was carried out by Jean and Allan McIntyre, both research students in the Department of Agriculture at the University of Melbourne. They travelled throughout Victoria (with concessional rail fares provided by the Victorian Railways Commissioners). Their approach has many characteristics similar to contemporary studies. The questions they investigated were (pp. ix-x):

*We want to dispel some of the mists of romanticism, and to that end we have tried to find out what sort of lives the people in country towns really do live, and what sort of lives they may hope to live. Why are our country towns where they are? Why are some declining and some increasing? What amenities have they?*

*What do their inhabitants do for a livelihood? How well do they serve their surrounding farm districts? What amusements do they provide? What is their local government like? And what do the people themselves think about their lives and what, if anything, do they want changed?*

Most of these questions hold true today, especially the last one. The scope of their study was determined by identifying all towns with populations between 250 and 10,000 people 'either within a municipal boundary, or if no boundary existed, within one mile of the post office or some other central building' (p. x). The exceptions they identified were places within close proximity to Melbourne; places whose major source of livelihood was as a holiday location; dormitory suburbs of larger places; and, places difficult to access [timber town identified] and non-farming [Yalloum identified]' (p. x). They also note there was no definition of an Australian country town at that time, which is still the case

today, although geographers present a common view (relating to population size, relative isolation, characteristics of rurality, and so on).

The McIntyres also outline their method of investigation. Initially they 'first thought that investigation would be carried out by means of a questionnaire which a church organisation undertook to circulate among country townspeople;' however they 'decided that personal interviews carried out by ourselves would be more satisfactory' (p. xi). Selecting the means for gathering reliable data remains a key issue in contemporary town studies. Interestingly the McIntyres' questionnaire collected information on (p. xi):

- Location of town, nature of district, size and lay-out of town.
- Amenities such as water supply, electricity, gas, etc.
- Communications – train and road services, mails, etc.
- Commerce and the professions.
- Industry.
- Recreational, social and cultural equipment and its use.
- Schools.
- Churches.
- Health.
- Miscellaneous.

Their book makes interesting reading because of the time in which the research was carried out: July 1941 and November 1942. They report that in one town 'the policeman was warned that there were spies in town' (p. xii). In its structure and format the study by the McIntyres is not greatly different to contemporary studies carried out by geographers today.

## 2.2 Oeser and Emery (1954)

The Oeser and Emery study of *Social Structure and Personality in a Rural Community* was carried out as part of a UNESCO project for an international study of communities and social tensions. Oeser and Emery acknowledged in their Preface that selecting a rural community which would be representative of Australian rural communities was a major difficulty. This is no less the case today. They chose a town dependent on wheat growing 'since the biggest part of the Australian rural population is engaged in wheat-growing' (p.v). They also state that 'the study was based more on psychological and sociological than on anthropological techniques because the research workers were psychologists, and because they could not spend enough time in the community to attempt a full-scale anthropological study' (p. v). This appears to be a common theme in rural town studies: that approach taken reflects the training of the researcher rather than the outcomes required from the research. Yet Oeser and Emery also adopt the geographer's tools in introducing their Mallee Town community.

They start with an assessment of the geography and economy of the town and its region. Their major source of information seems to be the *Mallee Town Weekly*. We suspect there was little reliable data collected by government at that time on the nature of these town communities. The early history and development of Mallee Town is also provided as a scene-setting device to the largely psychological analysis that follows. A description of the social structure

follows primarily as it relates to the agricultural production process. So farmers, business people, white-collar workers and labourers are identified and analysed. This is followed by membership of returned services clubs (significant in the early 1950s when the study was carried out), church groups, cultural and leisure activities. Their mapping of these structural relationships via a sociological perspective is comprehensive and sets the scene for their analysis of the citizens' perceptions of the social world. Oeser and Emery acknowledge with this shift they are moving from the descriptive, historical and deductive to the experimental and the inductive. Because this project was part of a comparative UNESCO project the institutional access to the community was legitimized through the state department of education. The purpose of the research was to learn about the values people in rural Australia held about, for example, attitudes to other nations (especially communists), role differentiation in the family, allocation of economic duties in the family, allocation of power and responsibility within the family, and, solidarity within the family. The researchers met with schoolchildren and their parents and asked questions relating to these views. They then collated and analysed their findings for the UNESCO project. It does not appear from their report on this research that those subject to the study were given insight into the purpose of the research.

In their summary of *Social Structure and Personality in a Rural Community* Oeser and Emery cite the McIntyre's (1944) conclusion that 'any plans for the future of country towns will be resisted unless they are plans for immediate economic benefit and do not involve a change in the people's way of life' (1954, p. 226).

### 2.3 Wild (1974) and Related Studies

Wild's *Bradstow* received considerable attention in the popular media as it was an expose of social class in a New South Wales country town. His purpose was 'to present an analysis of social stratification in a small country town (p. 1). Wild did 'field work' living in the town for two years as a participant observer. It is still regarded as a good example of an anthropological approach to understanding the structure and function of small towns. Wild used the 'reputational approach ... asking community knowledgeable whom they considered to be influential. ... I then interviewed all the reputed influentials' (p. 210). Wild also selected every fifth household in Bradstow interviewing approximately 20 percent of all households questions which went to his purpose of learning about the social stratification of that community.

In *Heathcote: A Study of Local Government and Resident Action in a Small Australian Town*, Wild (1983) comments on the relationship between the methodology and the theoretical framework. He notes that 'community research centring on participant observation is a social process through time, involving an ongoing interplay between theory, method and data whereby each are being reworked and redefined with respect to each other in the research process' (p. 152). It is this social process of research interacting with theory and method that this paper is concerned with. We are attempting to identify the best mix of discipline approaches to town studies that recognise how the researcher

effectively goes about their work developing a comprehensive understanding intent on a purposeful outcome which informs the community being studies as well as external policy makers about appropriate strategies for a sustainable future.

Wild's *Bradstow* remains the iconic anthropological study of an Australian country town. It received widespread media attention, being the first study of its kind to identify social stratification in an Australian country town. It spawned similar studies, discussed below, which have contributed to our understanding of rural towns and communities. When seen with recent views of Australia's rural socio-cultural history (see Waterhouse 2005) they provide people in these places, and policy makers from afar, with an insight into why they exist and what makes them function.

In *Mateship*, Oxley (1978), who later posed as a sociologist because he believed it was more in vogue to do so,<sup>3</sup> also adopted an anthropological approach similar to Wild in *Bradstow*. Clearly at this time in Australian community studies the anthropological perspective was predominant as Bowman (1981) was to capture in her compendium *Beyond the City*. She provided a forum for 'community studies' academics to review their work. They included Wild, Oxley and Oeser who reviewed and commented on the substantive findings of their respective studies. Surprisingly the contributors provided little information about how they went about their research.

#### 2.4 Poiner (1990)

Poiner's study *The Good Old Rule: Gender and Other Power Relationships in a Rural Community* was based on her doctoral work at Sydney University where she was supervised by Wild. Her approach has all the characteristics of Wild's approach. In introducing the research Poiner sets the scene for her anthropological approach. Prior to commencing her research she was a visitor to the town of Marulan in the Southern Highlands of New South Wales. As an occasional visitor 'we spent weekends and holidays there and were fortunate in meeting and making friends with a number of residents' (p. 1). However it was (pp. 1-2):

*one event [which] especially created the conditions for our acceptance. Soon after our move into the district one of the fires which break out nearly every summer in that region blazed in the country behind our small farm ... The communal bonds which were established in the shared experience of that fire furnished the basis for the development of district associations and friendships. I felt that, through it, our presence in the district was in some measure both recognised and accepted.*

So like Wild before her Poiner immersed herself in the community being studied following anthropological approaches to learning about and reporting on her case study community, one in which she was more intimately connected than most researchers would normally be.

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<sup>3</sup> Personal communication when the author and Oxley when colleagues at the University of Canberra.

It is important to note that Wild and his contemporaries were attempting to identify the structure and function of these places purely as it relates to the stratification of the local society. It is not the anthropologist's intent to change the community under study. While their work informs who is influential and in what realms it does not give us a comprehensive picture of the sustainability of these places. Contemporary studies are directly concerned with ways of improving the future viability and sustainability of rural towns and communities. Courvisanous and Martin (2005) have outlined the shift from predominantly anthropological studies to approaches which are more eclectic with a strong policy orientation being concerned with the sustainability of these towns. More recent approaches are typically eclectic in their intellectual orientation. With contemporary, cross-disciplinary approaches, the challenge for public policy makers is to determine the validity of these multiple approaches and the recommendations they make.

Fitchen's (1991) anthropological study of sixteen rural counties in upstate New York is similar in its approach to Wild and Oxley, for example. However her broader focus on a number of rural places, in this case several counties and their towns, enabled her to do a comparison to determine those which were doing well and why. This is similar in its policy orientation to the Canadian studies mentioned below.

### **2.5 Plowman, Ashkanasy, Gardner and Letts (2003)**

Like the Oeser and Emery study many years before it the Plowman *et al.* (2003) study of *Innovation in rural Queensland: Why some towns prosper while others languish* was carried out by psychologists using survey-based methods and interviews. Plowman *et al.* (2003) make the grand leap from the individual to the social: 'We draw heavily from the literature on individual personalities in organizational settings, and on the literature as it pertains to innovation within organisations. We then apply those ideas to communities' (p. 8). We question the validity of their approach.

Using Rogers (1995) socio-metric approach to identifying the *stars*: 'a person whose name is repeatedly suggested by several people in response to a question put to them, namely: *Who would you regard as the movers and shakers in this town, the people who make things happen?*' (p. 10). Plowman *et al.* (2003) identified people in eight towns who were asked to complete a semi-structured series of questions relating to innovation. They were also interviewed in order to obtain anecdotal views about innovation in their town. The 'quantitative responses were aggregated across all interviewees to give an innovation status score and an innovation trend score' (p. 10) for each town. The dilemma the researchers faced was how to determine the '*between group*' ranking of innovation between the towns. To do this they provided summary transcripts of the interviews from each town to three separate employees of the Department of Primary Industries who were invited to rank them in order of their level of innovation. Plowman *et al.* (2003) do not say if these officials were expert in innovation. The third source of data was an analysis of census data for 1991, 1996 and 2002 on growth, diversity and investment in each town. The

researchers then 'triangulate' the innovation rank (based on the aggregated scores of *star* surveyed), the rater rank on interview data and the rater rank on census data. These three ranks are then aggregated for an overall ranking.

The eight towns are not identified by Plowman *et al.* (2003). This is unfortunate as it does not allow their findings to be validated by others. We believe that the aggregation of ranking scores, rankings determined by government officials not shown to be expert in innovation or understanding small rural towns, and the aggregation of individual innovation data to determine a towns innovation status are questionable methods for understanding how each town performs. The purpose of ranking towns is not made clear and we can see no reason for doing so. We believe that the focus should be on understanding each town *per se*. Surely the purpose of learning about the process of innovation in each town is to find ways in which such towns can build on their particular attributes. The external factors impacting each town would surely discount any relevance of inter-town comparison.

The Plowman *et al.* (2003) questionnaire-based survey was based on organizational behaviour frameworks to build a picture of the individuals and relationships in eight Queensland towns. They experienced difficulty in determining 'between group' innovation resorting to 'three separate "blind" reviewers-employees of the Department of Primary Industries, Queensland (people with tertiary qualifications who had no prior knowledge of the research and who had no knowledge of the quantitative scores) – who were invited to rank the eight summary transcripts in the order of their level of innovation' (p. 12). As their conclusions about 'within group' innovation in these eight towns were based on these between group comparisons it brings into question the outcomes of this research.

### 3. CONTEMPORARY CANADIAN SMALL TOWN RESEARCH

Over the last decade Canadian researchers have focused on rural towns for several important reasons. Rural towns in Canada are largely dependent on agriculture and have experienced considerable change as a result of trade liberalization and declining commodity prices. Those places with a large proportion of Indigenous, or First Nations People, have been particularly adversely affected by these global changes. Two current Canadian research programs focused on rural communities are being carried out which use a range of research methods that engage the researcher in the 'social interplay' that Wild alluded to (above) which has impacted their theoretical understanding of these places and how they should learn about them.

Reimer (2005) and his colleagues in fifteen universities across Canada chose 32 study sites 'using strictly randomization procedures in order to facilitate such comparisons on 5 critical dimensions: whether they are exposed to global economies, whether they have fluctuating economies, whether they are close to urban centres, whether they have institutional capacity, and whether they are leading or lagging on a number of socio-economic indicators' (p. 2). The way these researchers studied each town is a combination of on site information gathering, about 'the community history, its people, institutions, volunteer

groups and municipal organization' and an analysis of 'data collected by Statistics Canada to document the demographic, geographical, economic, and population characteristics specific to each community' (p. 2). In addition since the initial data gathering the NRE2 researchers have included information on small businesses, cooperatives (which are a characteristic of rural Canada), impact of important events, access to services and leadership. Reimer and his colleagues have identified four sets of overlapping relationships; market, bureaucratic, associational and communal. It is both the extent of each type of relationship and the way they interact that they conclude impacts the sustainability of rural towns and their communities. They suggest high capacity to respond is a function of the agility of all four systems to interact with each other.

Matthews (2003) and his colleagues at the University of British Columbia have used the concepts and tools from the social capital literature (Lin & Erickson 2004) as part of their Resilient Communities Project to research social and economic development in coastal and First Nation communities and reserves in British Columbia. These places have been subject to dramatic change as 'the traditional bases of livelihood from fishing, logging and mining have declined drastically' (p. 1). Their research has been carried out in three phases: first with the assistance of BC Statistics a desk-based analysis of 131 separate coastal communities with a population of over 50 people. In the second phase questionnaires were sent to over 4,800 households in 22 communities. Door to door sampling was carried out in First Nation communities to ensure an adequate response rate. The third and final phase involved 'intensive interviews' in at least six communities. Matthews and his colleagues see the second, survey-based, phase as informing them about the 'structure of social capital formation' and the third phase as providing them with information about the 'dynamics of social capital utilization' (p. 4). Matthews' work is innovative in that it adapts the Position Generator developed by Lin and Dumin (1986) to identify connectedness in social networks. However, instead of using the typical occupations in the Position Generator Matthews and his colleagues recognised that in small remote communities the occupations or positions with status in these places would be different to the occupations or positions in urban Canada.

The NRE2 and RCP projects have much in common and have already had significant recognition from the academic and public policy community in Canada. Their common structure is a combination of exogenous and endogenous analysis adapted to recognise the context within which the communities they are researching are located. Reimer and his colleagues are focused on business relations in their rural agricultural communities while Matthews and his colleagues are very much focused on the plight of First Nations people.

#### **4. THE 1986-7 STUDY OF SMALL TOWNS IN VICTORIA**

Henshall Hansen and Associates were engaged by the (then) Victorian Department of Agriculture and Rural affairs to undertake the Small Towns Study. The 'origins of the study lie in the concern on the part of the State



Government and the community to more closely understand the causes and consequences of change in country Victoria and the impact of these changes on small towns' (Henshall Hansen and Associates, 1988). The aims of the study were (p. i):

- To examine the nature of the economic linkages between the government, commercial and farming sectors and to identify the key sectors influencing the viability of country towns.
- To analyse the perceptions, attitudes and behaviour patterns of people in small towns as they respond to changing economic circumstances.
- To identify items of a strategic nature to be taken into account in examining prospects and problems for small towns.
- To prepare an agenda of items for continuing Government and community involvement in small town development.

Henshall Hansen and Associates adopted a broad approach examining 'the overall situation in respect to small towns within the general context of rural Victoria', they were asked 'to undertake more detailed and focused investigations at the level of individual small towns, via a case study approach' (1988, p. i). On the basis of their analysis of economic and social circumstances in country Victoria Henshall Hansen and Associates identified some 30 different types of towns, for example: towns experiencing substantial growth in population and/or employment trends, towns experiencing substantial decline in population and/or employment levels, towns which are located in isolated areas, towns which are important provincial, regional or district centres, towns which service intensive farming areas/broad acre farming areas, towns with a diversified economic base, towns which have their own local government authority/form part of a broader local government Shire structure, towns ranging from hamlets (200 persons) up to 5,000 persons, and many other variations identified by the consultants. Out of this mapping of all small towns in Victoria Henshall Hansen and Associates identified six types of towns and chose six towns as their case studies:

- Manufacturing/Resource Base (Swifts Creek)
- Government/Private Sector Services Base (Camperdown)
- Tourism/Resort Base (Beechworth)
- Dry-farm Rural Base (Ouyen)
- Irrigated-Farm Rural Base (Stanhope)
- Community/Dormitory Base (Murtoa)

In addition the consultants chose six towns which 'emphasises **change** in these towns in terms of their role, size, and relationship with their hinterland and other urban centres' (p. 37). Change was seen as an important criteria because the nature and extent of change will tell why some towns change and others stagnate in their activities, populations levels and economic base. They were concerned about conveying 'experiences learnt from the Case Study Towns to other towns in Victoria which display similar characteristics in terms of activity base and the processes of change' (p. 37). Given there was a public policy outcome to this research; what lessons could be applied to other similar towns in Victoria the case study selection process was important. Henshall Hansen and

Associates identified seven steps in the town selection process in their report 'which reflect the emphasis on "change" in towns and the need to learn from the experiences of these towns' (p. 39). These steps were (pp.39-40):

- Select towns which represent a range of economic activities;
- Select towns on the basis of the over-riding requirement that – through their own development experience – they have lessons (including the failures) to convey to other small towns and to government about effective service delivery;
- Select towns which are involved in the process of demographic change;
- Select towns which represent the range of small town sizes;
- Select towns which are demonstrating a marked extent of change in socio-economic conditions, including change in economic, social, technological and other indicators;
- Select towns which represent a reasonable geographic distribution across Victoria; and
- Select towns which represent a reasonable distribution of farming activities.

From these steps, Henshall Hansen and Associates worked with the then Department of Agriculture and Rural Affairs to identify six towns. While the consultants made recommendations relating to each town they also identified key issues facing small towns. In summary these were (1988, pp. 51-54):

- Influence of regional centres on local businesses,
- Regionalisation of government services,
- Need for greater understanding by government and the community of changes taking place in small towns,
- Availability of government advisory services,
- Municipalities and communities are not always well-placed to deal with change,
- Some small towns are geographically isolated,
- There are only limited local employment opportunities for school leavers in small towns,
- Many small towns are poorly served by public transport, and
- The changing structure of farming affects small towns.

Henshall Hansen and Associates also drew out the lessons from their study, many of which appear relevant today. In their conclusion they note that (p. 66):

*The major difficulty faced by most small town communities is not in accepting the fact of change, but rather knowing how best to manage it. During the course of this Study some towns revealed a remarkable capacity to adapt to, and make the best of, changes they confronted. In general, these were towns which see their role not merely as one of reacting to change, but of shaping its outcome.' (1988, p66)*

It is to this last point that contemporary small town researchers have come to acknowledge. Based on the concept of social capital, as made prominent by Putnam (2000) and the key role of social connectedness, small towns researchers are now revisiting the techniques of the anthropologist (Eversole 2005) while

employing the empirical tools of the demographer and economist working from afar. We suggest that it will be the way these different research traditions work with small town communities which will both inform policy makers and provide a lead to towns people on the choices they have to respond to change in their place.

##### **5. IN SUMMARY: HOW SHOULD WE APPROACH SMALL TOWN STUDIES IN AUSTRALIA?**

The Henshall Hansen and Associates (1988) approach, driven by government concerns about change in small towns, was determined by their view at the time of the nature of small towns in Victoria. They did not do an in-depth diagnosis of social relations in each town, as Matthews has done with his analysis of coastal towns in BC, and Plowman *et al* in Queensland. The techniques used by Matthews were not available to Henshall Hansen and Associates at that time. The use of corporate-based organisational behaviour constructs to community studies was not known. Nor is it clear today that the application of theories based in corporate social settings to communal settings is valid.

The Canadian research (RCP and NRE2) suggests that the empirical methods reach a point of rapidly diminishing returns and that these techniques need to be complemented by techniques akin to those employed by the anthropologist (Courvisanous and Martin, 2005) for a comprehensive understanding about these places; how do they function and what is the prognosis for their future.

The public policy imperative is that the focus of support be on those places which are not doing well. Governments have enough insight into the nature of Australian towns today - from those prospering through both economic windfalls and their own internal characteristics to those in decline because of their changing context (economic, proximity to their urban centres and their own internal characteristics). The focus should be on those in decline in an effort to minimize the impact of change, as Henshall Hansen and Associates attempted in the mid 1980s, as well as those towns who are doing well so that they can sustain their current progress.

Without knowing what the social capacity of the town is, and how it might impact their ability to deal with change, an external analysis to determine those places in decline should be sufficient to identify where the research effort should be. In 1986 Henshall Hansen and Associates identified approximately 260 towns in Victoria with a populations less than 5,000. In fact 160 of these towns had populations of less than 1,000 and given the ageing of the population in these towns it has more than likely increased in number today. Clearly this many towns play an important role in rural Victoria, and the State Governments's regional development policy no doubt aims to do this. People live in these communities, they also require infrastructure and human services like their city cousins. Without a proactive strategy of analysis, policy and support these towns can become even greater social, economic and political burdens to the government of the day. What should be done and how can regional development scholars assist is an important question to be addressed.

In revisiting the Henshall Hansen and Associates study the Department of

Sustainability and the Environment has initiated this project with the Victorian Universities Regional Research Network, and John Henshall, project director of the original study. The DSE has provided an update on census information which provides the basis for discussion in each town. Not surprisingly people in these towns do not question the direction of the trend, for example, ageing and declining population. What they do question is the extent of the change given the census data several years old.

Our approach has been to first assemble this information on each town showing the changes over the last twenty years from census data. The next step has been for the designated town researcher (one from each university in the region of the town) to make contact with local institutions, chambers of commerce, sporting clubs, and so on, to arrange to meet these people and others interested in the research, and to arrange and publicise one or more public meetings at which the project is discussed and questions relating to the past, present and future situation for the town are asked. The team of the VURRN member (the lead researcher for each town) this author and John Henshall spend several days in each town conducting the interviews and meetings. Notes are taken and interviews recorded for later follow-up. In many ways this follow-up study is a microcosm of the initial study, because it is a follow up. Were we starting a fresh we would add the sociometric approach of Matthews and the Position Generator to get a better idea of the actual pattern of influence in each town. We are also better informed in analyzing our responses through the conceptual framework provided by Reimer and his colleagues in the NRE2. Is there a balance of communal, associative, market and bureaucratic relations and, most importantly, do people show 'agility' in being able to work across these relationships?

The research methods we believe most appropriate for understanding the structure and function of small towns, in association with the people who live in these communities and who have a vested interest in doing something to respond to the changes, are a combination of external empirical analysis (for context), discussions with people who are relatively influential (as determined by their peers) across these communities in order to test the extent to which people work with each other across a set of communal, associative, market and bureaucratic relations. Of course the level of generality in such research is function of many things, not the least the resources made available for the research. In an ideal situation this would occur as a matter of course within communities and serve as the basis for which they determine their collective future together.

Clearly a better understanding of all small towns across the State will inform governments and the community about the plight of these places beyond the general and often unfair generalisation that they are sleepy backwaters, ageing, with no culture, community or future. Our experience is that this is not necessarily the case. Most small towns have a strong sense of community, provide internal support and do well in terms of their own sense of self worth and integrity. Small town public policy needs to start from a perspective of community building for sustainability which empowers, supports and works with the people in these towns around an agreed policy framework, beyond annual

project funding and external expert advising, to one which sees this process as the business of government.

Many local government councils are providing this service, but it is questionable whether the function is embedded in ongoing work in the same way that, for example, physical infrastructure maintenance, a core function of local government, is carried out. Local leadership is, ironically, in many local government councils an ephemeral, secondary function. State governments would also benefit by moving their current ad hoc approach, which supports a limited number of local government communities, to a program which sees small town and community development as a central function in regional development (Martin, 2005).

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