

**Northern and Central Victorian Councils**

**Joint submission to the Inquiry into Rural and  
Regional Disadvantage**

*Draft Submission*

**March 2010**



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# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Inquiry into Rural and Regional Disadvantage**

On 25 November 2009, the Victorian Legislative Council tasked the Rural and Regional Committee with undertaking an inquiry into the extent and nature of disadvantage and inequity in rural and regional Victoria. This included inquiring into, considering and reporting on disadvantage in the state, and in particular:

- a) Examining current evidence of disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria with a view to identifying the social groups most affected by disadvantage.
- b) Identifying any gaps and weaknesses in methods for measuring, recording and capturing information on disadvantage and inequity in rural and regional Victoria.
- c) Identifying the key factors of disadvantage and inequity in rural and regional Victoria, such as access to education, health care, employment opportunities, housing affordability and transport.
- d) Identifying the geographical locations in rural and regional Victoria where disadvantage is most severe with a view to prioritising these areas for future action by Government.
- e) Identifying rural and regional areas of significant disadvantage and inequity that may be masked by the comparative prosperity of surrounding areas.
- f) Investigating the impact of social and economic trends on the future of rural and regional Victoria in the context of disadvantage.
- g) Examining current Government responses to rural and regional disadvantage.
- h) Identifying priorities for action by Government to tackle key rural and regional disadvantage issues.
- i) Examining measures taken at a local level to combat problems of hardship and disadvantage.
- j) Investigating approaches in other jurisdictions to combat rural and regional disadvantage.

The Committee is required to report no later than 7 October 2010, and has called for public submissions by 31 March 2010.

## **1.2 This submission**

This is a joint submission of eleven of the councils located in central and northern Victoria: Campaspe Shire, Central Goldfields Shire, City of Greater Bendigo, Gannawarra Shire, Hepburn Shire, Loddon Shire, Macedon Ranges Shire, Moira Shire, Mount Alexander Shire Mildura Rural City & Swan Hill Rural City.

The purpose of the joint submission is to highlight the patterns that occur across municipal boundaries, related causes of disadvantage in these municipalities and the common barriers to addressing disadvantage.

Some councils will also be submitting individual submissions to highlight particular problems in their municipalities.

## 2 Disadvantage in northern and central Victoria

### 2.1 Extent and nature of disadvantage in northern and central Victoria

Consideration of most socio-economic indicators highlights a disparity between rural and regional Victorians and their metropolitan counterparts.

Although rural and regional Victorians have similar levels of unemployment to metropolitan Victorians (5.1 percent compared to 5.4 per cent)<sup>1</sup>, they generally earn less (\$36,298 average annual income compared to \$44,432<sup>2</sup>), have lower levels of educational attainment (62.4 per cent have no post-school qualifications compared to 54.4 per cent and 24.2 per cent did not complete Year 12 compared to 40.8 per cent) and do not live as long (males: 78.6 years compared to 80.5, females: 83.8 years compared to 84.5)<sup>3</sup>. Many of these factors are combined in a lower average SEIFA score (985 compared with 1,025) and rural municipalities making up 16 of the 20 most disadvantaged municipalities and only 4 of the 20 least disadvantaged municipalities.

This disparity between rural and metropolitan Victoria is particularly the case for the northern and central Victorian councils involved in this submission. At the last Census the average unemployment was 5.7 per cent, the average annual income \$34,600, 63.6 per cent of residents had no post-school qualifications, 22.7 per cent had not completed Year 12 and the average SEIFA score was 971.

However, these averages mask the variation between municipalities and disguise pockets of acute disadvantage. As a general rule, disadvantage increases as you move away from the Melbourne-Bendigo transport corridor.

#### 2.1.1 Variation between municipalities

On many indicators, there is a significant variation between the peri-urban municipalities and those further into the hinterland. For example, while the Macedon Ranges has lower levels of disadvantage than the average Melbourne municipality, Central Goldfields and Loddon Shires rank as some of the most disadvantaged municipalities of the state (Figure 2-1). Additionally, Macedon Range has Year 12 completion rates almost double those of Gannawarra, and half the level of disability<sup>4</sup> and almost a third of the unemployment of Central Goldfields.

This does not however, mean that there is no disadvantage in the peri-urban areas. Low-income households in the Macedon Ranges and Hepburn face significantly greater housing stress than those in other municipalities. While 96.9 per cent of lettings in Gannawarra are affordable for indicative households on Centrelink payments, only 60.3 per cent and 33.5 per cent are in Hepburn and the Macedon Ranges, respectively.<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Except where noted, the source of data in this section is: ABS, *2006 Census of Population and Housing*, Commonwealth of Australia 2006.

<sup>2</sup> ABS, *National regional profiles*, accessed 19 March 2010, Commonwealth of Australia, 2005.

<sup>3</sup> DHS, *Life expectancy at birth Victoria 1997 – 2001*, <http://www.health.vic.gov.au/healthstatus/le-97-01.htm#summary>, accessed 19 March 2010, State of Victoria, 2008.

<sup>4</sup> Measured as people requiring assistance with core activities.

<sup>5</sup> DHS, *Rental report: September quarter 2009*, State of Victoria 2009.



**Figure 2-1: Relative socio-economic disadvantage across the region and the state**

### **2.1.2 Areas of acute disadvantage**

There are also areas of intense disadvantage, mostly occurring in towns. For example, while the municipalities' average unemployment is 5.7 per cent, Maryborough experiences 9.1 per cent unemployment, Mildura 7.9 per cent, Bendigo 7.1 per cent, Robinvale 6.7 per cent and Castlemaine 6.5 per cent.

Some of these areas experience acute disadvantage, with combinations of generational poverty, young children at risk, poor health and domestic violence. For example, in addition to an unemployment rate of 7.9 per cent, Mildura recorded 8,300 offences per 100 000 people for 2008/09 compared to a state average of 7087<sup>6</sup> and 17.2 child maltreatment cases per 1,000 children compared 5.7 for Melbourne.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, in Central Goldfields households have average weekly incomes half that of the national average, one fifth are in social housing<sup>8</sup>, the teenage pregnancy rate is 2.5 times the Victorian average and there are 2.34 alcohol-related deaths compared to a Victorian average of 1.51<sup>9</sup>. Similar statistics exist for Nyah West and Korong Vale and to a lesser extent Inglewood, Eaglehawk, Nyah, Robinvale, and Castlemaine. This variation in relative disadvantage and the pockets of acute disadvantage can be clearly seen in Figure 2-2.

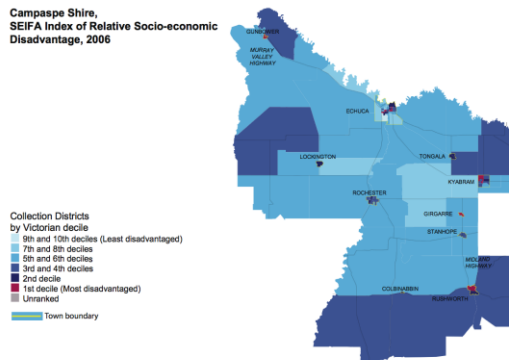
<sup>6</sup> Victoria Police, 2008/09 *Crime Statistics*, [http://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?Document\\_ID=782](http://www.police.vic.gov.au/content.asp?Document_ID=782), accessed 19 March 2010.

<sup>7</sup> Mildura Rural City Council, *Mildura Social Indicators Report 2008*, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> M. Perry, *Gold Prospects, Business Case for whole-of-community planning and development 2008-16*, Central Goldfields Shire Council, 2008.

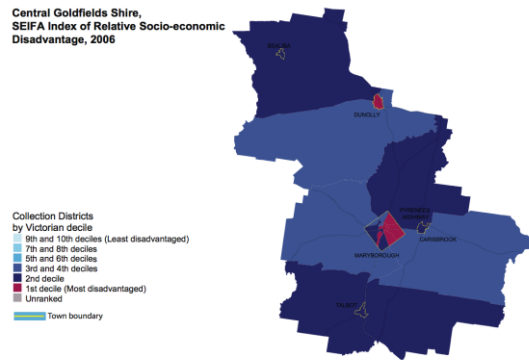
<sup>9</sup> A.M. Laslett, P. Dietze, S. Matthews & S. Clemens, *The Victorian Alcohol Statistics Handbook Vol. 6: Alcohol-related mortality 1999-2002*, State of Victoria, 2004.

**Campaspe Shire,  
SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic  
Disadvantage, 2006**



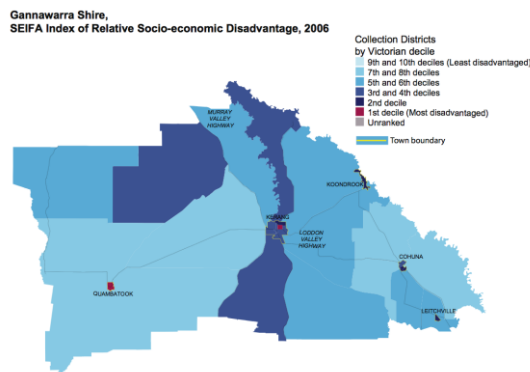
Source: 2006, ABS, Cat no. 2033.0.55.001 Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Data only, 2006; DPCC, 2008, Towns in Time

**Central Goldfields Shire,  
SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic  
Disadvantage, 2006**



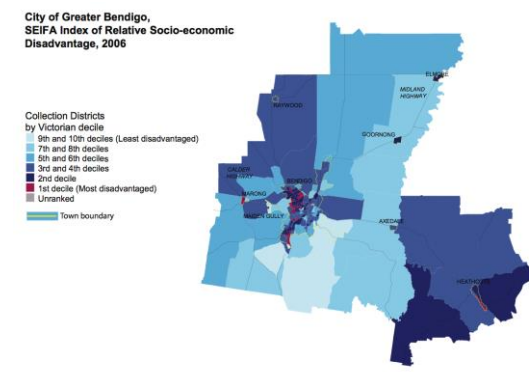
Source: 2006, ABS, Cat no. 2033.0.55.001 Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Data only, 2006; DPCC, 2008, Towns in Time

**Gannawarra Shire,  
SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic  
Disadvantage, 2006**



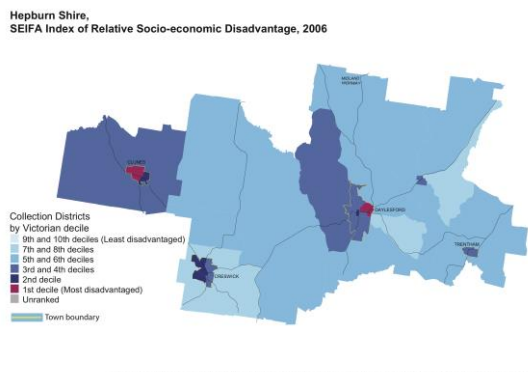
Source: 2006, ABS, Cat no. 2033.0.55.001 Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Data only, 2006; DPCC, 2008, Towns in Time

**City of Greater Bendigo,  
SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic  
Disadvantage, 2006**



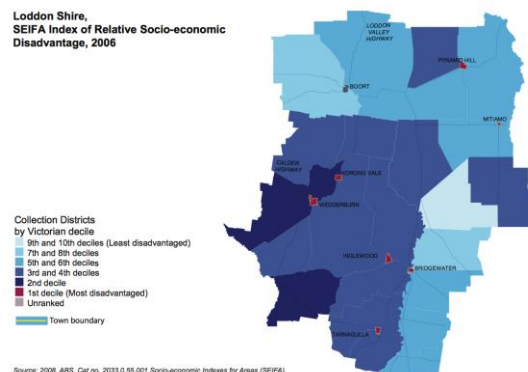
Source: 2006, ABS, Cat no. 2033.0.55.001 Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Data only, 2006; DPCC, 2008, Towns in Time

**Hepburn Shire,  
SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic  
Disadvantage, 2006**



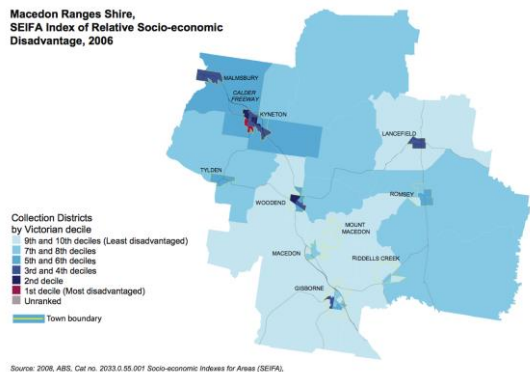
Source: 2006, ABS, Cat no. 2033.0.55.001 Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Data only, 2006; DPCC, 2008, Towns in Time

**Loddon Shire,  
SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic  
Disadvantage, 2006**



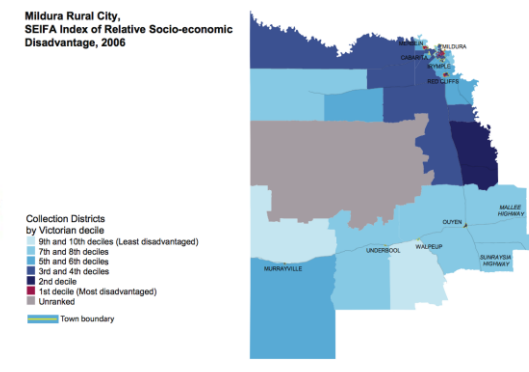
Source: 2006, ABS, Cat no. 2033.0.55.001 Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Data only, 2006; DPCC, 2008, Towns in Time

**Macedon Ranges Shire,  
SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic  
Disadvantage, 2006**

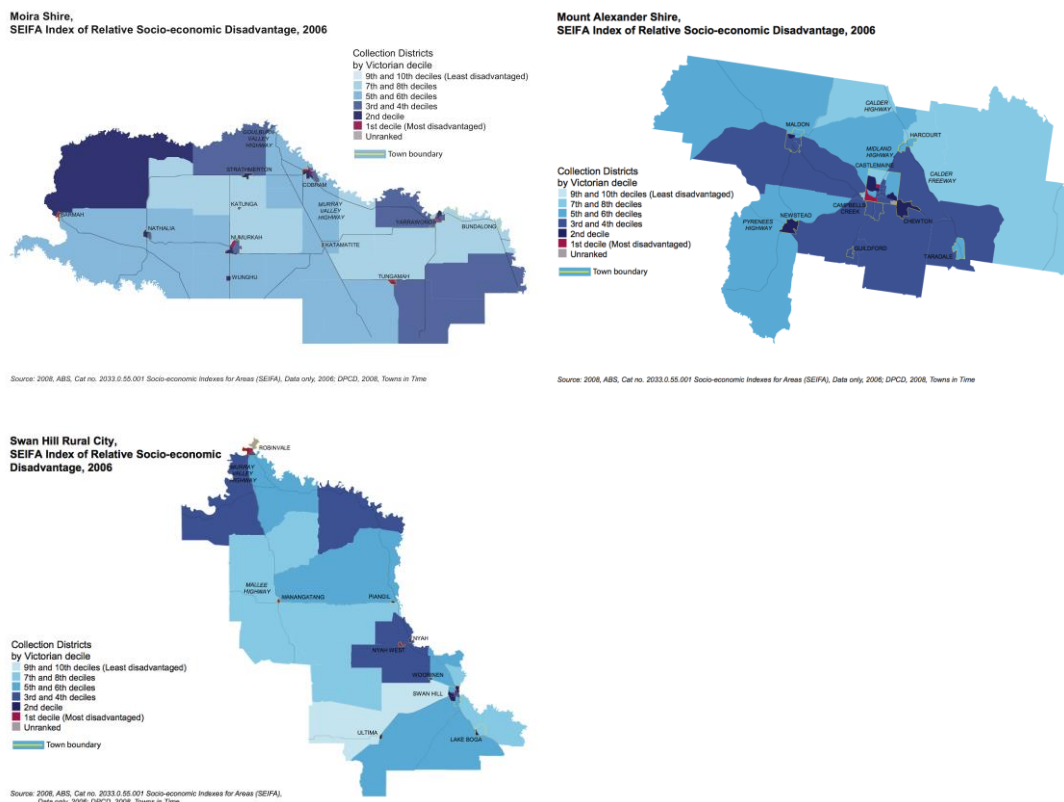


Source: 2006, ABS, Cat no. 2033.0.55.001 Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Data only, 2006; DPCC, 2008, Towns in Time

**Mildura Rural City,  
SEIFA Index of Relative Socio-economic  
Disadvantage, 2006**



Source: 2006, ABS, Cat no. 2033.0.55.001 Socio-economic Indexes for Areas (SEIFA), Data only, 2006; DPCC, 2008, Towns in Time



**Figure 2-2: Index of relative social disadvantage in Loddon Mallee region by statistical local area, 2006**

## 2.2 Causes of disadvantage

Across the northern and central municipalities, there are common causes of disadvantage. The most significant of these are:

- the level of education.
- a lack of employment and education opportunities.
- the level and location of health services.
- a lack of transport to access health services and education and employment opportunities.
- the higher cost of essential items such as food and transport.
- the rapid rate of economic change.
- the availability and affordability of appropriate housing.

These causes of disadvantage are discussed below.

### 2.2.1 Lack of education

Many councils view poor education as a root cause of much of the disadvantage in the municipalities. Several studies document the link between low levels of education and difficulty finding stable employment. This is compounded where social skills and the ability to form stable relationships is low.



## **2.2.2 Lack of employment and education opportunities**

Employment is critical in introducing rigour and routine to households. While employment in some parts of the northern and central municipalities has been growing, employment in other parts is stagnating or decreasing. Decline of industries in places like Maryborough has led to intergenerational disadvantage with the collapse of the manufacturing sector and the absence of other industry resulting in many people becoming long-term unemployed. The continuation of this in recent years is seeing some families entering their third or fourth generation of poverty.

Across the region, the lack of jobs coupled with few tertiary education options severely limits the opportunities for school leavers. On Track data shows that young people completing secondary school in regional Victoria more often cite the costs and distances to be travelled, the need to move away from home and the costs associated with study as barriers to undertaking post-secondary study or training than their metropolitan counterparts.<sup>10</sup> In general, university enrolments appear to be higher around towns that have a university campus. For example, enrolment figures from schools near Mildura are not as high as those near Bendigo, a town that also has a University.<sup>11</sup>

## **2.2.3 Level and location of health services**

While many key health services are provided in the regional centres of Bendigo, Ballarat, Shepparton and Wangaratta, in many cases this regional provision does not meet people's needs. For many people in outlying areas, it is time-consuming and costly to travel to regional centres. For example, a trip from Swan Hill to Bendigo can take more than two hours by public transport while a trip from Mildura to Bendigo can take over five hours. This often requires people stay overnight to access a health service.

Furthermore, some services are not suited to regional provision. For example, transitional housing for people experiencing short-term homelessness as a result of domestic disputes is not as effective if it is in a regional city as if it is in local towns.

Finally, some services suffer from a lack of funding, which can affect their ability to provide outreach services to the smaller towns of the region.

## **2.2.4 Lack of transport to access health services and education and employment opportunities**

Accessing services can also be very difficult or inconvenient. In many cases, public or community transport does exist, but not only is it time-consuming and costly (as discussed above), it is often limited, inflexible and not timed to suit people's needs. For example, many of the buses from small towns to regional centres run only three days of the week or once a day. This is not frequent enough to enable people to travel there and back in one day and requires either an overnight stay in the case of health appointments or moving away from home for students.

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<sup>10</sup> DEECD, *The On Track Survey 2008, The destinations of school leavers in Victoria*, State of Victoria, Melbourne 2009.

<sup>11</sup> DEECD, *The On Track Survey 2007: The Destinations of School Leavers in Victoria*, State of Victoria, Melbourne, 2007.

### **2.2.5 The higher cost of essential items such as food and transport**

Due to the distance from cities and from each other, rural residents often face higher food and transport costs. This is exacerbated for low-income residents who spend a higher proportion of their income on these essential items and for those living in areas far from regional centres.

### **2.2.6 The rapid rate of economic change**

The rate of economic change in some rural communities has in many cases overwhelmed their resilience. This is especially the case in northern Victoria where economies dependent on agriculture have suffered successive dry years and those dependent on irrigated agriculture have suffered the double affect of less rainfall and lower water allocations.

Coupled with government decisions to stop the logging of River Red Gums (in Victoria and New South Wales) and consideration of permanently lower water allocations, these communities are experiencing stress and an uncertain economic future.

In addition to reducing incomes and increasing unemployment and stress, drought is also a factor in the low uptake of tertiary education by regional students. Godden reports that 'young people decide not to participate in tertiary education because they do not want to financially burden their parents'.<sup>12</sup>

### **2.2.7 The availability and affordability of appropriate housing**

Higher house and rental prices in several towns experiencing population growth is exacerbating disadvantage in the towns themselves and creating and concentrating disadvantage in towns further a field.

As the population and housing boom in Melbourne and the surrounding peri-urban areas has led to higher house and rental prices in several towns along the Melbourne-Bendigo corridor, many young, elderly or low-income residents are finding it increasingly difficult to afford housing in these towns and are experiencing increasing levels of rental stress.

In some cases, these low-income households have migrated to towns off the corridor where the housing is more affordable. This can cause further disadvantage as these towns often have fewer health and education services and fewer transport connections. This is particularly important given many of these low-income households have higher health and social service needs.

It can also see them living in old houses in need of repair. Not only do these low-income households not have the resources to renovate houses, housing developers are not attracted to low-income areas and so the stock of housing remains old.

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<sup>12</sup> N. Godden, *Regional Young People and Youth Allowance: Access to Tertiary Education*, Centre for Rural Social Research, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, 2007; pp. 40.

## **2.3 Future trends**

Three social and economic trends are likely to exacerbate disadvantage in the northern and central Victorian municipalities: population change; drought, climate change and water availability; and the rising cost of energy, transport and food.

### **2.3.1 Population change**

The population of the northern and central Victorian municipalities is projected to change in two ways: the population will get increasingly older and numbers of people will increase in peri-urban and regional centres and decrease in the hinterland.

#### **Ageing population**

Like the rest of Victoria, the rural and regional areas in northern and central Victoria are projected to age significantly in the future. By 2026, the proportion of the population in northern and central municipalities aged 75 years or more is expected to have risen from 7.5 per cent to 11.7 per cent. In contrast the proportion of people aged 20-29 is projected to fall from 12.5 per cent to 10.9 per cent.<sup>13</sup> As older people often have greater health needs and lower incomes, this will put more pressure on the existing health and social services and will see more people on lower incomes.

#### **Population increase**

The populations of the peri-urban areas, regional centres in northern and central Victoria and towns along the Murray River are projected to increase as more people migrate from Melbourne to regional Victoria. As it has already, this will create further pressure on housing markets and continue to push low-income households to places without services and transport.

#### **Population decrease**

The population of rural areas in northern and central Victoria is projected to continue to decrease as pressures for farm amalgamation and a drier climate see people leave farming and fewer services in small towns see people migrate to larger regional centres. This has the potential to cause a vicious cycle as fewer services cause people to leave small towns making it increasingly difficult for the remaining services to maintain viability and leading to a withdrawal of government services as populations fall below critical thresholds.

### **2.3.2 Drought, climate change and water availability**

A drier climate and the resultant fall in water available for irrigation will likely see fewer farms. The impact of this on local economies will depend on the size of the enterprises that remain and their production. If, as has happened in recent years, fewer farms produce more output, towns may be relatively unaffected. Sustained production levels should keep processing facilities open and related service industries in business.

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<sup>13</sup> *Victoria in Future 2008*,  
<http://www.dse.vic.gov.au/DSE/dsenres.nsf/LinkView/BD4EF8A400A9E6DECA256D8D00151A4F775206E3E0281595CA256F0E0013C1FB>, accessed 22 March 2010, State of Victoria 2009.

However, if an industry's production falls, it may fall below the critical mass necessary to support processing and related service industries. Should this decline occur, it has the potential to lead to substantial unemployment given the low skill base of many workers in the agricultural industries? Where this has occurred elsewhere, people with skills have left the district and unemployment and welfare dependence amongst those remaining is increasing.

Lower water availability will also affect towns as there will be less water available for consumption and recreation and the price of water will likely increase. Access to recreational water is critical for community resilience and individual's mental health.

### **2.3.3 Cost of energy, transport and food**

The cost of energy, transport and food are all likely to go up in the future as more expensive sources of oil are required and a price is placed on greenhouse emissions. Without commensurate increases in pensions and government support, this will see an increasing proportion of the people's incomes spent on essentials and may see their income exceeded. This is particularly the case if there are not improvements in access to public transport and lower cost freight networks are not developed.

## 3 Addressing disadvantage

### 3.1 Barriers to addressing disadvantage

The northern and central Victorian councils involved in this submission find addressing disadvantage to be hindered by:

- insufficient and inappropriate funding.
- institutional barriers.
- current Federal and state government policy.
- inadequate infrastructure and government services.

#### 3.1.1 Funding

More so than their metropolitan counterparts, rural and regional councils have insufficient funds to pay for the programs and infrastructure they deem important in addressing disadvantage. This is particularly the case in municipalities with a low socio-economic rate base, such as Central Goldfields, and those covering a large land mass but with small populations, such as Loddon and Gannawarra.

In most cases, councils are forced to seek funding from State and Federal Governments. However, this funding is often inappropriate as it is:

- **Short-term**

Addressing disadvantage in any community requires a commitment to working in and with that community over a long period of time. Funding from State and Federal agencies is often predicated on a three to four year project life, after which funds can be, and often are, removed. Alternatively, programs are passed to councils to fund, something councils can rarely afford.

- **Focused on new assets**

Often funding for infrastructure is focused on the creation of new assets while in many cases councils actually need funding to maintain their existing asset base. Known as the infrastructure renewal gap, there is a growing difference between the state councils are meant to have maintained infrastructure to and that which they have been able to afford to. The focus on new assets in this environment is particularly frustrating as not only does it not assist in closing this gap, it often adds to the asset base for councils to maintain.

- **Provided per capita of population and focused on areas of growing populations**

Areas of low and decreasing populations often find it difficult to attract program funding and services, especially when they are provided on a per capita of population basis. As discussed above, this can lead to a vicious cycle that ensures towns continue to decrease in population.

- **Does not pay for the essential support and facilitation roles**

Many of the programs that address disadvantage require input from several agencies or service providers. In this environment, it is essential to have someone whose job it is to

facilitate this collaboration and to carry out the actions agreed upon. Increasingly, Federal and State Governments want to focus on funding on-ground works rather than these facilitative and support functions, leaving councils to either fund these functions themselves or risk that programs will not be effective as agreed actions will not be carried out.

### **3.1.2 Institutional barriers**

Disadvantage requires effective coordination between many public servants. Policies to address disadvantage should be grounded in the practical realities of a situation. As policy is often developed in Melbourne and programs are implemented in rural and regional areas, this requires coordination between regional and metropolitan agency staff. Institutional barriers and short timeframes can prevent this occurring.

More fundamentally, addressing disadvantage requires coordination between a number of government agencies including those responsible for policing, health, education, transport, housing and community development. Bringing these many parties together can be difficult as they are often answerable for narrowly defined performance measures, have independent policies and operate in isolation.

Similar incentives, coupled with fewer opportunities for alternative employment creating competition, can also see local service providers fail to coordinate.

### **3.1.3 Government policy**

Three recent state and Federal government policies in particular make addressing some of the causes of rural and regional disadvantage difficult: the Federal Government's changes to Youth Allowance, the state government's changes to capital funding for social housing and the separation of ownership of irrigation water from land title.

As discussed previously, a lack of education is perhaps the most important cause of disadvantage and rural and regional students are less likely to undertake post-secondary study because of the costs associated with the study itself, transport to and from places of study and moving away from home. The Federal Government's recent changes to Youth Allowance have inadvertently made accessing government assistance for these costs harder for rural and regional students and have already resulted in more rural and regional students declining or deferring university places.

Recently, the Victorian Government has restricted its provision of funding for the development of social housing infrastructure to incorporated housing associations. This means councils cannot access state government funding for new social housing infrastructure development and must instead source the funding from elsewhere or cede ownership of their current stock to a housing association. For some councils this is an untenable position, as they do not want to cede ownership of a community asset to a private body and consider it important that social housing be provided locally to be responsible to local needs.

Finally, some councils will in the next year begin face a permanently lowered rate base due to the separation of irrigation water from land title. Removing the value of irrigation water

from the value of land has reduced Gannawarra's rate base by 16 per cent and the four years of transitional funding will soon cease.

### **3.1.4 Infrastructure and government services**

A lack of transport, education, health and telecommunication services not only affects the existing population, but also affects the ability of an area to attract professionals with skills and investment by industry. As has been seen with the growth along the Melbourne-Bendigo corridor and in Bendigo itself, professionals will choose to live in places with good roads and access to public transport, access to high-quality educational facilities, advanced health services and high-speed internet.

Additionally, to be competitive industries often need access to low cost energy, transport and communications and a high skills base. This requires good road and rail infrastructure and all the factors that attract people with professional skills.

## **3.2 Successful programs and projects**

Despite a number of barriers, some programs and projects have been highly successful at addressing disadvantage in rural and regional communities. Some key programs or projects include:

- Community planning – Many councils in northern and central Victoria have, with their communities, undertaken exercises to plan for the future of that community. This involves prioritisation of projects and programs and council often provides funding for some of the highest priorities.
- Multipurpose facilities – These facilities bring together a variety of government or private services in one facility and assist people with navigating them. This is particularly useful for people who interact with government services regularly such as the elderly, people on low-incomes and young people.
- Best Start – This Victorian Government initiative supports communities, parents and service providers to improve the early years services so they are responsive to local needs. The aim is to provide the best environment for children in their early years and therefore result in better health, education, developmental and wellbeing outcomes.
- Men's Sheds – Men's Sheds are places where men can come together to socialise, learn new skills and knowledge and contribute to their community through volunteering and mentoring.
- Neighbourhood Renewal – The Department of Human Services coordinates input from across government into identified disadvantaged neighbourhoods. This includes developing partnerships between regional offices of government agencies, local governments, local businesses, residents, community groups and service providers, coordinating local investment and employing a project or place manager and project staff responsible for achieving cross-cutting outcomes for their neighbourhood.
- Mildura's Community Engagement Framework – This project aims to deploy a holistic approach to issues. The project's governance team identified five key indicators to be improved and established operational groups for each measure consisting of government agency staff and community members. The role of the operational groups is to review what is already being done and investigate what can be done to improve that measure.

These programs have five key characteristics that have made them successful:

1. They approached the problem from the target audience's perspective rather than those of the institutions involved.
2. They are tailored for local conditions.
3. They are based on evidence of what works well and what doesn't.
4. They genuinely engage the community to find solutions.
5. They are involved in the communities over a long time.

These factors are critical in the success of any program or project to address disadvantage.

### **3.3 Priority actions for State and Federal Governments**

The northern and central councils consider it possible to tackle many of the causes of disadvantage in rural and regional Victoria and to prevent further disadvantage from developing. To do this, the councils suggest:

- Community planning be undertaken in all small towns and expanded to include transport, health, education and telecommunication services. This would require commitment of funds to enable projects be undertaken and services provided.
- Governments explore the potential to provide longer-term funding for community programs. Although the importance of pilot programs in learning what works and what doesn't is recognised, this needs to be balanced with the need to work in communities over the longer term in order to achieve change.
- Governments learn from and build on current successes. There are already programs and projects that have been planned with the community, tailored for local conditions, are based on evidence, have long investment timeframes and provide for essential coordination roles. The councils would encourage these be continued and expanded to new areas, albeit carefully to enable them to be tailored to local conditions.



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