

Beyond the Conventional Wisdom: A Reply to Sher & Sher (1994)

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Jonathan and Katrina Sher have constructed a scaffold that could underpin rural development in broad terms, redress the marginalisation of rural people, and treat them as if they really mattered. Moves in the directions espoused by the Shers are detectable in recent Australian government policy. However, in the Australian literature, the term regional rather than rural is occurring more frequently. Confusion between what is regional and what is rural Australia could lead to initiatives that assist rural communities that are being usurped by regional centres masquerading as rural. Policymakers are failing to appreciate that this confusion will further marginalise the real rural communities.

Mention "rural" to me and my mental image is of cattle, a stockman galloping by, dry savannah, and lazily swirling dust through which a red sun shafts. It is a farming image, an idealised one, an icon. Bound up somewhere inside this view also is a belief in a "fair go." This is an Australian ideal, a talisman. I find my image, my idealisations, my icons and talismans, intruding almost perniciously into my considerations of the Shers' arguments about the importance of rural Australia to Australia as a whole and about their concerns regarding existing government policy, or lack thereof, as it affects those rural communities (Sher & Sher, 1994). The Shers have quite rightly challenged the icons that live in the minds of most Australians (Sher & Sher, 1994, pp. 11, 19). They contend that Australian rural policy, in general, and rural development policy, in particular, should be built on reality, rather than those icons. Changing their discourse to *nonurban* Australia to escape from my *rural* idealisations and, further, concentrating on the aspect that it is a *development policy* to which the Shers are referring, enabled me to appreciate the argument. There is much more to *nonurban* Australia than there is in an idealised *rural* Australia.

However, in considering what would constitute a definition of nonurban, I have identified what I take to be a new, and, to me, disturbing, phenomenon occurring in Australia. The simple bifurcation of "city" and "country" (Sher & Sher, 1994, p. 5), one accepted in the daily discourse of Australians, is being replaced by a tripartite segmentation of Australia into urban, regional, and rural divides. The rural, often thought of in simple binary terms of "farm and a fair go," is becoming marginalised with the developing emphasis on regionalism. In this article, I ex-

tract the core statements in the Shers' article; define further this new tripartite segmentation, for which I use the names urban, regional, and rural; and reflect on what the Shers have to say in light of implications drawn from this new segmentation.

The Shers' Argument

Fundamental to their argument is the assumption that rural people really do matter and rightfully should be a part of the progress of Australian society as a whole. Rural people should not be sidelined, be allowed to stagnate, or be excluded from the benefits of progress gained by the rest of society. Progress, moving forward, implies there must be some form of rural *development* policy. Such a policy should have definable outcomes to measure success and should identify the arenas where development should take place.

Following similar basic tenets, the Shers erect a developmental scaffold comprising three main parts (see Table 1). First, there is the identification of why rural Australia is important to the future and the present of this country. Once this importance is established—and it is done so on a much broader and deeper level than merely with questions of equity or economics—the need for a comprehensive and meaningful rural policy that is also a rural development policy is underscored. Second, there is a concise statement of the goals that any rural development policy should aspire to reach. These goals are broad and visionary, but contain the essence of measurable outcomes from which performance indicators could be built. And third, there follows the identification of four arenas of action through which life could be breathed into the goals of a rural development policy.

As a contrariety to this scaffold, the Shers identify what they take to be government rural policy now. This

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Table 1
Reasons for, Goals of, and Arenas of Action in a Comprehensive and Meaningful Rural Development Policy (Sher & Sher, 1994)

Reasons (pp. 7-10)	Goals (pp. 27-31)	Arenas of Action (pp. 31-39)
<p>1. <i>Rural Australia is the source of food self-sufficiency for the entire nation.</i> "Australia is in the minority of nations that is genuinely self-sufficient in food production. In an unstable world, this advantage looms increasingly large."</p>	<p>A growing rural population base.</p>	<p>Empowerment: "[A]ll stakeholders in the rural development process must be empowered to contribute, as partners, to the creation of overall policy and implementation plans. Subsequently, each stakeholder is empowered to take responsibility for undertaking those specific aspects of the overall initiative each is best suited, and is adequately resourced, to accomplish."</p>
<p>2. <i>Rural Australia is the wellspring of national self-sufficiency in terms of virtually all other raw materials/natural resources.</i> "If push came to shove, Australia could sustain itself in terms of its fibre, energy, and other resource needs strictly from domestic resources."</p>	<p>An equitable share of the rewards derived from rural resources should be reaped by rural people and their communities.</p>	<p>Environment: "[R]ural development is a long-term phenomenon that must be economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable."</p>
<p>3. <i>Rural Australia is the cornerstone of Australia's export economy.</i> "[R]ural Australians are directly responsible for 2 out of every 3 dollars Australia earns from international trade."</p>	<p>A growing and diversifying rural economic base.</p>	<p>Entrepreneurship: "Rural development . . . is the process through which rural people and communities come to discover and exploit the range of economic opportunities in their own back yards."</p>
<p>4. <i>Rural Australia is the foundation of a disproportionately high share of Australia's economic assets and economically productive activity.</i> "Rural Australia is absolutely central to the nation's capacity to create new wealth."</p>	<p>A growing rural employment base.</p>	<p>Education: Education is "the necessary precondition and the primary enabling strategy" for the other arenas."</p>
<p>5. <i>Rural Australia is the safety valve taking pressure off the cities—and the preferred place for Australian city dwellers seeking to change their residence.</i> "Surveys of metropolitan Australians consistently have shown that the majority express a marked preference to reside in nonmetropolitan areas."</p>	<p>An improved quality of rural life.</p>	
<p>6. <i>Rural Australia is the primary location of renewal and recreation for most Australians.</i> "70% of all Australians choose to spend their vacations somewhere in rural Australia."</p>	<p>Stronger, more cohesive rural communities.</p>	
<p>7. <i>Rural Australia is the touchstone of Australia's international identity and cultural distinctiveness.</i> "[I]t is the places, people, and products of rural and Aboriginal Australia that most world travelers have in mind."</p>		

policy is seen as targeting assistance, seemingly of a remedial or compensatory nature (Sher & Sher, 1994, pp.18-20), to only two sectors of the nonurban population. These two sectors of the rural community equate broadly to the farm and fair-go icons mentioned above. More formally, the two sectors are referred to as the farming (agricultural) and social service (welfare) sectors. Other sectors are mainly left to feed off policies designed for the majority of Australians (e.g., tourism, education). This leads to the contention of rural people, most of whom live in urban surroundings, that majority policies are really policies suited to their urban counterparts and, in a number of ways, do not take cognisance of rural realities, needs, and aspirations.

Existing government policy in rural Australia is reactive. It supports the agricultural sector in the hope of crisis limitation. It provides welfare services when crises do occur in an attempt to ameliorate the condition. But it really misses the point that a proactive policy designed to *develop* rural Australia must reap greater benefits more rapidly and at less overall cost than a policy that reacts to a few sectors, individuals, isolates, and cliques within a community.

The Shers' "Farm and Welfare" Argument Reconsidered

Given the temporal context of the Shers' paper—it was originally written in 1993—a quick reference to some of the then-current published documents does support their assertion that rural Australia is seen in just two facets: that of agriculture and that of welfare services. Three examples, one from each of the eastern states of Australia—Victoria, Queensland, and New South Wales—provide supporting evidence.

The November 1991 publication from the Victorian Office of Rural Affairs, a *Study of Government Service Delivery to Rural Communities*, is one case in point. This publication originated from a ministerial advisory group that sought submissions and held interviews throughout Victoria on service delivery to rural people. Of the 35 attendees from government departments and agencies present at forums held at 4 different centres, 16 represented aspects of welfare service. Only once did a representative of the Department of Manufacturing and Industrial Development attend. Of the other attendees, four represented environmental concerns, six education, four were involved in agricultural support services, and the remaining five could loosely be classed as those responsible for infrastructure.

Later in the publication, a compendium of 57 service delivery examples is given. Thirty-two concern delivery of social, predominantly welfare, services. Another ten concern agricultural issues (mostly planning). The remaining 15 cross the spectrum of education (6), economic develop-

ment (4), access to information issues (3), and the need to buy locally (2).

It would indeed seem that government policy for rural Australia is seen predominantly in terms of two facets: welfare service and agriculture. The Shers' four arenas of action—empowerment, environment, entrepreneurship and education—whilst not entirely absent, are little in evidence.

I give as a second example, my recent experience in Queensland, which virtually replays the study from Victoria. Queensland also has an advisory committee, the Queensland Rural Regions Advisory Council (QRRAC), to assist the Minister who has responsibility for rural communities. For the October 1994 meeting of QRRAC, invitations had been extended to significant local people in a North Queensland country town so that they could have input into the committee deliberations. Attendees were grouped into three categories: local government; business (mostly farming interests); and service providers (mostly welfare service providers). The three groups were heard separately from each other, as if they were removed and distinct entities with little relevance one to the other. At the very least, this seemed to rest awkwardly with the first of the Terms of Reference of QRRAC: "[the] need for increased co-ordination between and within governments and community involvement in the delivery of rural and regional adjustment programs." This was quoted from an Invitation and accompanying Information Letter sent from the Office of Rural Communities, October 1994, to possible attendees.

As a third example, I wish to point out that government should not be singled out as the perpetrator of a simplistic two-component attitude to rural Australia. It is within the very rural culture: There are the farmers and graziers, and there are the welfare recipients, and, in an ideal world, they do not meet. Consider an extract from a letter written by a district chairman of the Cattlemen's Union in New South Wales:

Graziers operate in a high-risk world where life is a gamble and where they must constantly make tough and sometimes heartbreaking decisions. They are accustomed to setbacks, losses and hard knocks. They expect to work hard and live by old-fashioned standards where self-help is the key word.

The essential features of this world may now be threatened by a tempting assistance package that has the potential to erode the underlying structure of a way of life, and may well act to divide the grazing community into two classes—those who accepted assistance, and those who did not. (Cossins, 1994)

The agriculture/welfare duality becomes oppositional in its simplicity. Little wonder that there are government initiatives that appear to support this status quo.

But this is not the complete story. In mid-1993, as the Shers' were submitting their completed paper to the Commonwealth Department of Primary Industries and Energy (which had commissioned it), a Strengthening Local Economic Capacity (SLEC) taskforce consisting of paid consultants toured rural Queensland gathering information from a number of sources including farming, social service, general service providers, educationists, environmentalists, developers, manufacturing and retail business, mining, and tourism (Local Government Association of Queensland, 1993). Information obtained from meetings was collated into broad categories of strengths and opportunities, and summaries returned to the areas where the SLEC taskforce met. SLEC, by its very nature, targets the arena of entrepreneurship at a local level, and the mode of operation of the program was more reminiscent of some of the American "retention and expansion" programs—although at a more rudimentary, perhaps novice, level—seeking to build and enhance local commercial activity.

The contrast between this multi-sectorial approach and the agriculture/welfare emphasis of the previous examples could hardly be more marked. Similarly, more recent federal government initiatives also have moved in the direction of a wider view of nonurban Australia. The statements flowing from the *Working Nation* initiatives (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994) and the McKinsey Report (Office of Regional Development, 1994), published a year after the Shers' original paper was completed, illustrate an approach to a nonmetropolitan development policy even more closely aligned to the arenas of action proposed by the Shers than is the SLEC example quoted above.

The federal government bases this different approach on the recognition that

Australia's regions contain a wealth of talent, women, and men of energy, commitment, and vision, people who want to build and strengthen their region. (Prime Minister's Foreword, Office of Regional Development, 1994).

When this statement is combined with an ideological belief in the economic flow-on effects of "training" and the necessity and benefits of competing in the global marketplace, then three of the Shers' four arenas of action are being addressed. Empowerment is implied by recognition of regional expertise, entrepreneurship by competition, and education by "training."

All four arenas of action, including the environment, are identifiable in the 13 regional issues delineated in another federal government report, the Kelty Report (Taskforce on Regional Development, 1994)—again post-

Shers. The 13 issues identified are transport, labour market, education, industry policy, communications, agriculture, water, environmental management, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, culture and heritage, tourism, energy, and business support. There is even one complete chapter in the Kelty Report entitled "Empowering the Regions."

A New Segmentation

However, to use these newer expressions of government policy directions as the basis for criticism of the Shers' article—generally along the lines of the Shers being "behind the times" and failing (as outsiders?) to appreciate rapidly evolving government policy—is itself a failure to understand a new and disturbing development in the discourse on rural Australia. A clue lay in the QRRAC Term of Reference quoted above where it was necessary to mention *rural* and *regional* programs.

For a long time, the labels *rural* and *regional* Australia have been used as synonymous for "nonmetropolitan" Australia. There were the cities and there was the "country." The assumption was that policy formulated for nonmetropolitan Australia, by definition, must address the needs of rural Australia. Increasingly, this is no longer the case. There is a growing differentiation in Australia between what is rural and what is regional. More and more, rural cities and larger towns are being treated as, and want to view themselves as, a part of urban Australia—cities in miniature. Yet at the same time, there are aspects of "country" they still cling to. The term "regionalism," more correctly meaning a geographic area, is increasingly being used in this context. Regionalism is developing the narrower meaning of "regional centres." The older divide, variously expressed in terms of town and country, urban and rural, metropolitan and nonmetropolitan, is now no longer a simple binary, often oppositional, situation. It is becoming a tripartite segmentation.

The three nodes that are developing I will call *urban*, *regional*, and *rural* Australia. *Urban* should be taken to mean largely the capital cities and their surrounds, including "country" dwellers who travel daily to urban environments for work. *Regional* means the larger cities and towns sprinkled across Australia. These cities and towns act as centres of supply and distribution, provide services largely akin to those found in urban centres, and have labour force profiles similar to the urban labour force profile. In both cases, suburban style residential living is a characteristic. And then there is *rural* Australia, which is most easily defined as "the rest."

This "rural rest" has a number of attributes that make it distinct from both the urban and regional segments, four of which I mention here. First, *rural* means isolation by physical distance, not so much from major centres, but a

personal spatial physical isolation. The suburban allotment is not the norm and there is less of humanity with whom daily physical contact is possible. But there is also a greater social closeness in daily lives. There is a brotherhood of like kind, perhaps the more obvious because of the distance/isolation factor. Second, *rural* means a deep and interwoven relationship between the family and the enterprise in which they are involved. Rural is not a place where the worker and the workplace can be treated as separate entities or mediated through the vehicle of a third party, such as unions. Third, *rural* means one of the last areas where one can be individualistic and independent and where there is a greater emphasis on personal daily decision making and self-reliance, the outcomes of which will directly affect the decision maker. And fourth, *rural* is where nature and natural forces impinge on the consciousness far more than do the works of humanity.

Implications of the Tripartite Segmentation

The three segments into which Australian society is becoming divided have not yet become delineated in the general community. This is especially so of the distinction between rural and regional. But rural people see themselves as being buffeted from every side in this developing differentiation between regional and rural, as the following illustrate:

- In the federal government's *Working Nation* (Commonwealth of Australia, 1994) documents, programs, and strategies of a "regional" nature appear to address regional (township) issues with few benefits to the rural community. In other cases, there are government departments and agencies that laud their spending on "country" Australia by quoting expenditure that is of a regional nature. The nuances in the meaning of "regionalism" and the shifts in how the word is used should now be becoming apparent.

- At a state level, many rural people see the net outcome of recent decentralisation attempts as resulting in regional centralisation, leaving the rural people significantly worse off than when government activities were centralised only in the capital cities.

- At the local government level, controls over land uses, known in most parts of Australia as town planning, limit the possibility of carrying out activities other than farm practices, even preventing, in some cases, value adding to farm products being carried out on farm, in favour of at designated areas in towns. The end result is a marginalisation of rural people from the mainstream benefits accruing to Australian society.

Within the educational context, there appears to be an active construction of a regional/rural hierarchy of priorities. Recently, educational advisers employed in Queensland to assist predominantly *rural* schools where

one or two teachers form the sole professional staff in small, often remote, communities, have been replaced by advisers who would reach a greater *regional* audience.

The provision of post-compulsory vocational training places at *regional* centres has become the accepted way government will address *rural* training needs.

In response to a request for improved telephone services to allow better transmission of distance education programs to *rural* areas, Telecom Australia replied in October 1994 that "the provision of this service is costly and expansion into new areas can only be done where it is economic to do so." Yet at the same time, Telecom quoted increased "country" spending, with \$14 million being spent on trialling cable television at a nearby *regional* centre.

It has also become more common to hear principals of larger (*regional*) schools say of smaller *rural* schools that the smaller schools have to learn they cannot afford the services the big schools get.

Similar examples of confusion of what is regional and what is rural, or active marginalisation of rural to the benefit of regional, can be found in most spheres of government activity. The net effect has been to make rural living relatively more difficult than regional, and, more particularly, than urban dwelling. Just how difficult can be judged by the demographic shifts taking place in Australia. Rural population is falling in favour of regional and urban growth centres. And with these demographic shifts, the rural images of Australia, the icons, are fading.

Back to the Shers

There is evidence that more recent government policy addresses needs in "country" Australia along the broad lines espoused by the Shers. I have no doubt that some criticism of the Shers will rest on arguments that the gist of what they were saying has since appeared in some government policy and programs, and therefore the Shers were needlessly critical of a government that must have already been moving in a similar direction, unbeknownst to them.

But this criticism of the Shers misses the point on several fronts. First, some policies and programs moving in the espoused direction are akin to the swallow and the coming of spring. Second, it fails to understand the timing of the writing of the Shers' article in the progression of events and the audience to whom the follow-up address was directed at Townsville.¹ And third, the criticism fails to see the shortcomings associated with the lack of an

¹Intemperate comments from certain people during the Townsville Conference, notably one politician and one rural industry leader, flow directly from this point. The comments served more to show limited knowledge about, and failure to do "homework" on, the Shers' paper, rather than any measured critique of their arguments.

enunciation of government philosophy informing possible policy shifts, and in particular, the needs for a cogent, succinct, and objective overview to underpin such a philosophy.

Leaving that aside, my concern is that the Shers did not recognise the developing rift between regional "country" and rural "country." Government programs along the lines suggested by the Shers are more likely to be suited to, couched for, and aimed at regional Australia than at rural Australia. This leaves rural Australia to continue to be seen in the light of an agriculture/welfare duality, and, with further marginalisation,² the welfare component will increase.

It is not my contention that nothing at all is being done for rural Australia. My argument is that a significant proportion of what is thought as being done does not reach its real target. The newly defined regional Australia, more akin to its metropolitan counterpart, siphons off—usurps to itself—activities, services, and funds that are believed to be addressing the needs of rural people. Small wonder then that rural people see themselves as forgotten, while decision makers, especially in government, either feel that they are trying valiantly and success must be just around the corner or that the problem is just too intractable.

A recent nationwide survey of rural Australia prepared by the Country Women's Association underlines just how parlous the situation has become. This report refers to behaviours symptomatic of social breakdown—gambling, domestic violence, suicides, drunkenness, crime—and pleas for a "life preserver" to be thrown before it is too late to prevent the "end of rural Australia as we know it" (Jones, 1995). That life preserver needs to be more than welfare. It needs to begin a resurgence of rural Australia, and in the absence of anything else, the Shers' outline of how to achieve this, already identifiable in some government initiatives, has great value as the platform from which to launch action—providing, of course, that any action is not waylaid by the emerging regionalism!

A Particular Word About the Place of Education

Recent research underscores the necessity for educational initiatives in rural areas. Poverty is currently decreasing the literacy levels of Australian students (Orr, 1995), compounding existing assessment that rural education levels are already below the Australian average (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 1991). This, and the fact that the average school leaving age for rural students is below the Australian average, graphically demonstrates Orr's

²Public support for rural families crippled by the long-lasting drought, while laudable and done with the very best of intentions, treads a very fine line of converting the welfare mentality into a charity mentality; thus, further marginalising those very rural people so desperate for help.

(1995) contention that the link between disadvantage and academic performance is producing an education underclass in schools. Yet in all the examples of government committees and initiatives from which I have quoted in this paper, representatives of school education were noticeable by their absence.

Education cannot stand aloof while it becomes harder to live in rural Australia and while rural participation rates in education suffer. Consider that

for every child who drops out and fails to enter productive society, Australia loses hundreds of thousands of dollars in taxation and pays up to \$300,000 in welfare or institutional support. The economics don't make sense. (Burrows, 1995)

Further, if the very foundation—education—on which the Shers' other three arenas of action are built is flawed and inadequate, entrepreneurship, empowerment, and the environment must suffer.

Conclusion

While the Shers did not recognise the growing bifurcation between rural and regional Australia,³ they do give cogent reasons for greater investment in rural Australia. I have fined down what rural Australia is more and more becoming to mean. While development along the lines espoused by the Shers is occurring regionally, it has to be extended rurally. At present, this extension is not occurring partly because of confusion over the meanings and implications of what is regional and what is rural.

Also, the Shers give outcomes associated with investing in rural Australia as if rural Australians really matter. These outcomes are as valid for rural Australia as for regional Australia where the outcomes are already incorporated in an increasing number of programs and strategies for regional development.

This is not to say that providing for rural people is inexpensive, and providing for rural development could increase the expense, at least initially, for it is a long way

³However, they do comment on the discrepancy in numbers of rural people identified by different methodologies used to define rurality, without realising the discrepancies are largely accounted for in this new category of regionalism. Also, they aggregate statistics of a regional nature (using the traditional meaning of a region being a geographic area). For example, rural Australia is the preferred place of living for city dwellers seeking to change their residence, when it is obvious that it is regional, not rural, Australia that is the attraction. This aggregation to support investment in rural Australia is the other side of the coin, where it is more common to see regional (geographic) aggregations of statistics to support regional (in the new sense) investment needs!

back from where rural Australia is right now. How far back is encapsulated by Hudson (1992):

On most statistical variables, whether they be poverty, income levels, employment, education, training or social support indices, rural inhabitants are found to be in a worse position than urban residents. Government funding has been inadequate, spasmodic, and unevenly distributed. (p.14)

However, considering the value of what rural is to Australia,⁴ the people of rural Australia are entitled to expect greater returns for their labours than they are presently experiencing. The dilemma for the decision makers to solve is that the returns should reach the true rural Australia, the people on the ground in more senses than one, without being reduced by the claims of regional Australia. But, without this investment, the icons will continue to dim; the rhetoric of "fair go" will be mere cant; the heartland of Australia will increasingly become just too hard to live in; intermittent attempts to arrest or redress the decline will be, in effect, just tokenism; population will continue to cluster in urban and regional enclaves; and perhaps one day someone will read the Shers' seven reasons for the need for a rural development policy, and wonder why the Shers' advice was not taken to heart and applied in the truly rural parts of the "nonurban" Australia.

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⁴For the Shers' assessment of the "value" of rural Australia, refer back to my Table 1. Some other measurements of value include: "15% of Australia's people live in rural areas—and produce—67% of Australia's foreign earnings" (Sher, 1994); 6.5% of Australians who live north of the Tropic of Capricorn—far outside the major centres of urban and provincial Australia—produce 44.5% of Australia's export earnings (Stone, 1992).