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Sun, surf and scrub: dimensions of social disadvantage in communities in the Northern Rivers region of NSW

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Abstract
This study describes an investigation of social capital and social disadvantage in five communities on the north coast of New South Wales. Using a qualitative approach based on grounded theory enables our understanding of these phenomena to go beyond statistics and tap the rich sources of data to be found in community members and community workers. A perception is described of growing disadvantage and neglect at a governmental level fuelled by the rise of neo-liberalism and a growing imbalance between the market, government and community. Against this 'big picture socio-economic causation, a number of key community problems and potential solutions are also discussed.

Key Words: Social Capital; Neo-liberalism; social disadvantage; community development.

Statistics and snapshots: communities in the Northern Rivers

Purposes of the study
This study set out to investigate the role of social capital in helping a rural community in the Northern Rivers area of New South Wales deal with social disadvantage. The concept of social capital is relatively recent and was brought to the fore by Eva Cox in her 1995 series of Boyer Lectures. Principally she emphasized its importance in building a civil society and the vital role of social processes in being human. Bullen and Onyx (1998, p.15; 1999, p.14) describe eight elements that define social capital: participation in local community, neighborhood connections, family and friends connections, work connections, proactivity in a social context, feelings of trust and safety, tolerance of diversity, and value of life. Thus, social capital concerns networking, interaction between people, and mutual reciprocity. It can also be seen as the accumulated resources occurring to groups or individuals through these networks (Bourdieu & Wacquant 1992).

However, as the research progressed it became clear that while social capital was a vital ingredient in sustaining communities in the face of economic hardship it might not be the

panacea for solving issues of disadvantage envisaged by government in particular. Rather, it is only one part of a more complex picture. In short, underpinning growing social disadvantage is the dominance of neo-liberal dogma and the abrogation of responsibility by governments and related agencies-fundamentally, the market must prevail.

Neo-liberalism involves the dominance of the market in society to the point where it becomes an end in itself. Aided and abetted by diminishing government influence the market influences all aspects of social and political decisions and life (George 1999). In the context of this paper, neo-liberalism results in less protection for citizens particularly by governments as they increasingly focus on the economy.

Therefore, as it became clear that social capital was only one factor in a more complex phenomenon we widened the scope of the study. In all we talked to people in five communities in the Northern Rivers area of New South Wales. These people were from all walks of life including business, the retired, local government, the unemployed, youth and community development workers. To assist with our understanding of what was happening in these communities we also searched other reports and commentaries related to our findings. This study consists of five case histories and the findings are not meant to be generalised to other communities. We are, however, hoping that the findings may shed more light on how social disadvantage might be addressed in rural communities and to contribute to the increasing body of knowledge relating to this phenomenon.

Throughout this paper we refer to the notion of social disadvantage, which is defined in its broadest terms and includes factors such as unemployment, average family income, welfare dependency, family breakdown, crime, and health status. An important clarification here is that all these indicators are generally statistically derived and are drawn from such sources as social welfare dependency figures and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). A key point made through this report is that social statistics alone are not sufficient indicators of the character, nature and capability of a community, which in itself might be an important message for policy makers.

Why these communities?

The importance of social capital was evident in the first case study we conducted in this series, which was of Kyogle. The Kyogle community had been flagged by social and community services sector professionals at the local level, as a case of “innovative practice”. A number of projects had, or were being, trialed in the area and those professionals working closely with the community felt that Kyogle could provide us with some informative data. We found a number of innovative projects had been undertaken by the community to address important social problems.

In conjunction with these reports, the release of statistics from the Centre for Population and Urban Research at Monash University (1998-1999) pointed clearly to a significant level of statistical social disadvantage in Kyogle and its surrounding areas. Notably, this was followed by a report by Vinson (1999), which also recognised Kyogle's significant statistical issues relating to disadvantage.

Following the attainment of further funding, we sought to examine additional case studies to add to our understanding of how the problem of social disadvantage was being addressed in the Northern Rivers Region. Thus, we chose two other adjoining North Coast communities in Murwillumbah and Mullumbimby and two different communities in Brunswick Heads-Byron shire and Ballina. This selection of cases was based on an attempt to disconfirm data already collected and hence strengthen any theoretical propositions.

Methodology

The methods used in this study were based on Grounded Theory (Glaser & Strauss 1967). This approach consists of a number of processes designed to obtain as rich, reliable and valid data as possible. The key principles involve: letting the data determine who next to talk to or where to go for information; looking for disconfirmation through convergent interviewing; recognising saturation (the point where information is repeated) when it occurs; and letting the data determine the next set of questions to be asked.

All interviewees were referred to us by previous informants. Hence purposive sampling was used to select information rich cases for study in depth. An initial set of interview probes were developed by the research team. These probes were transformed at each interview in accordance with the data collected. Thus at each interview we were seeking disconfirmation and eventuality, saturation.

A specific set of interviews were undertaken with community welfare and development workers in the abovementioned towns. The expectation here was to identify problem areas from their unique perspective and seek out innovative approaches to dealing with social disadvantage. Potential interviewees were approached by one of the research team and asked if they would participate in a study about their community. They were told that the interview was strictly confidential, that their identity would not be revealed at any stage of the study and that they could withdraw from the study at any time. It was explained that interviews would take about 30 to 45 minutes. Notes were taken by the researcher during the interview, with the permission of the interviewee. The information derived from the interviews was analysed according to a coding and categorisation process consistent with Grounded Theory.

One hundred and seven people were interviewed and included a mix of those involved in community development, local government, business, youth, the public sector, retirees, and the unemployed.

Findings: addressing social disadvantage in the Northern Rivers

The effects of neo-liberalism

This study's findings contribute to the growing body of evidence suggesting that the real problem underpinning social disadvantage lies in the culture of neo-liberalism that colors the political, economic, and social landscape. Our findings also support the view of Offe

(1998) who proposed that a truly civil society needs a balance of the market, the state and the community.

As Eva Cox (2001 p. 89) put it:

> …we need governments which are seen as capable of being fair, acting in the common interests, offering justice and public services. We need markets to give us the autonomous choices we want to make, and train us in making responsible decisions. We need community to affirm our identities and relationships, pursuing our particular interests and passions and acting as advocates, participating in civil and political processes.

An imbalance in the market, the community or state leads to a condition of toxicity. It is evident that this imbalance currently exists with the market dominating all social and political decisions. This state of affairs needs to be addressed by the major political parties and through leadership in order for change to occur on the ground.

Others have noted the importance of partnership in addressing social disadvantage with an emphasis on the partnership between government and community (e.g. Lyons 2000). Niland (2000) states that it is the interaction between government funding and social capital that really matters. Herbert and Smith (1997) in a review of national and international reports concerning the alleviation of poverty identified as common themes: the need to integrate service provision by the private, public and non-government sectors; and the need for partnerships between governments, individuals and the community sector. Similarly, Latham (1997) contends that there is a need to devolve responsibility to the local level while maintaining government support. Despite this view he calls for an appropriate level of resources. The alternate view held by those such as Cox (1995) and Putnam (1996) is for stronger government involvement to build social capital.

There is a clear understanding at all levels of government about the need to build strong communities. But, as Alston (2000) notes, it is one's ideology that determines how the problem is approached. For many years the approach has been towards minimizing government involvement and devolution of responsibility for social problems to the local level. More and more the notion of increasing social capital as a means of addressing issues of social disadvantage has become popularized and part of the language of community development. Thus, social capital is seen by governments as a way to decrease financial involvement and responsibility. Increasingly, the market is failing to deliver, in the shape of jobs and economic prosperity to regional communities and, as we can see, these communities are experiencing overwhelming problems.

How this condition of imbalance between state, community and market has come about needs to be considered in the context of complex and very pervasive forces. That these three factors are no longer mutually exclusive has important ramifications at a policy level.

The increasing social disadvantage in rural Australia

To summarise thus far, one of the most important features of the past 200 years has been the victory of capitalism. Current neo-liberal thinking reinforces the dominance of market forces, which drive policy development and implementation at all levels, including local government. In fact the market now provides governance rather than government. The effect of this overwhelming power of the market has had important implications, which are reflected in the sections below.

The first of these implications is that while the free market has brought enormous benefits to human society it has failed miserably in doing anything about inequality and has, in fact, exacerbated it (Ife 2002).

Many regional areas of Australia are currently experiencing significant economic and social problems, creating regional microcosms of social disadvantage. Moreover, the disadvantage experienced by non-metropolitan communities has recently become a national and international issue. Nationally, electoral losses have highlighted the need for politicians to attend to the needs of rural and regional Australia. In particular, high levels of social welfare dependency in Australia create significant economic impact. At the same time, social issues surrounding youth, families and unemployment raise particular concern for the Social and Community Services sector. A number of research initiatives have recently focused upon social and community services issues at the local level (Badcock 1994; Vinson et al. 1996; Mao 1997; Vinson 1999).

Tony Vinson's publication *Unequal in Life* (1999) examines the distribution of social disadvantage in Australian society. Using statistical methods, Vinson's work utilises data at a postcode level to calculate a single factor score (described as the "risk score" for localities, summarising the area's general susceptibility to a range of social problems). The risk scores for NSW postcodes ranged from -5.21484 (Windale in the Newcastle area, the most disadvantaged) to 1.83241 (Bellevue Hill in Sydney, the most advantaged). The study found that a relatively small number of postcodes accounted for a large percentage of the locations that rank highly on nine social disadvantage indicators. The intention of the Vinson study was to raise the awareness in the wider Australian society of the extent to which such disadvantage is becoming entrenched within particular neighbourhoods and to identify ways in which such disadvantage can be addressed.

Herrington (1999) has pointed out that, according to the Vinson index, the Northern Rivers Area of NSW is the most disadvantaged in Australia, outside of some ethnic and Aboriginal communities. Tweed and Grafton Community Services Centres are the most disadvantaged districts on the Far North Coast, whilst Ulmarra, Casino, Kyogle, Maclean, Byron and Richmond River Shire are the most disadvantaged Local Government Areas (Herrington 1999, p.4) However, and much more important than the raw statistics, Vinson goes on to say that:

> … there is no sense in which the residents of those communities (most disadvantaged) can be burdened with the blame for the cumulative social deprivation. The important questions are whether we can identify instances of

> severe community disadvantage, and what can be done, in partnership with the residents of those areas, to improve their life opportunities and those of their children (Vinson 1999, p. 56).

The Northern Rivers area of NSW has had for some time one of the highest welfare dependency rates in the country, with 46% of the adult population dependent on welfare (in the Tweed this figure is as high as 53%), as compared to an Australian rate of 32% (Birrell, Maher & Rapson, 1997). According to the same report, 59% of all children aged 0-15 living in the Northern Rivers are living in families receiving Additional Family Payments, or are "working poor" or welfare recipients and in the Richmond River Shire this figure may be as high as 82%. While these figures are startling, many areas of Australia are experiencing similar crises.

The distance between the 'haves' and the 'have nots' is increasing at an alarming rate and we are seeing the beginning of fortress Australia as the wealthy withdraw to walled estates (Latham 1998) and cameras in city streets protect the shop fronts but shift the problem to the next suburb (one local town's recent approach to managing antisocial behaviour in the city center). Australia is fast mirroring the situation in many western cities where abject poverty is found only streets away from opulence.

Is this just another report?

A major finding of this study was the cynicism felt by community workers about the lack of response by government to social problems.

A great deal of frustration was expressed by some of our interviewees about the need for solutions to the issue of social disadvantage in the region. The question asked of us as researchers was what might be the outcomes of this report because other reports about social problems had resulted in little or no action. Interviewees wanted to know that what they had to say would actually make a difference.

The day-to-day issues confronting people working in the area of community welfare and development are clearly overwhelming and there is much to be done on the ground, at the coalface. It is evident that in fact things are getting worse rather than better when it comes to the size of the problem and the inadequacy with which social disadvantage is being addressed.

Devolution of responsibility to communities

Another important effect of neo-liberalism and economic rationalist principles has been the application of free market principles to dealing with social disadvantage and to the welfare state in general. The impact of this approach and the imbalance in Offe's (1998) notions of community, state and market were reflected in these studies and are described below.

Social capital as a panacea

One of the major findings of this study was the important role of social capital in helping communities address social problems. According to Putnam (2000 p19) '…the core idea of social capital theory is that social networks have value.' It is a widely discussed

concept, being first used by Coleman (1988), and then later by Bourdieu and Wacquant (1992) and Putnam (1993, 2000). Recently the concept has been embraced by no less than the World Bank (1999) even though, paradoxically, it is one of the key players in neo-liberalism (George 1999).

The Prime Minister, John Howard, in an address to the World Economic Forum dinner in 1998 referred to social capital as being vital for international and local communities to be able to manage change. The call was timely because many commentators have noted how social capital has been in decline in a world in which the individual is more the focus of need rather than the group. There is an increasing transience to communities. The structure of human society has shifted rapidly from tribes, to extended family, to nuclear family, to a currently emerging structure with the individual at the nucleus. Community action is much more effected now by collaborative individualism, an idea derived from the notion of globalisation, rather than the development of a civil society.

We found that social capital was indeed a key factor in the ability of the communities we investigated to overcome social problems. This was particularly true in those communities with a poor economic base, where social disadvantage was highly visible. Where there is a strong sense of an 'extended family network', as one respondent put it, strong networks, and a sense of community then social problems can be addressed through innovative and imaginative projects. For example, in a study by Vinson, Baldry and Hargreaves (1996) the specific issue of child abuse was examined in two adjoining economically depressed localities with contrasting rates of abuse. An outstanding difference between the two localities was the structure of the networks of the two sample resident populations, indicating that social support was a major enabling factor in areas where child abuse was less reported.

However, despite this effort the underlying causes of these problems and the general level of disadvantage have not disappeared. While the community aspect of Offe's (1998) equation of community, state and market is strong the other two components appear weak. Several respondents noted that while a community can have the best intentions in the world, the critical nature of funding for many projects cannot be ignored. This funding needs to come from effective partnerships with the state and the private sector. The Families First program was mentioned as an excellent example of what can be done when communities and government work together but it was felt that these types of initiatives, likely to have long-term effects, needed to be expanded. It was also thought that the planning and implementation of initiatives needed to be driven by the community: 'bottom-up' rather than 'top-down'.

Some rural communities depend almost entirely on the jobs provided by perhaps two medium-sized enterprises nearby. The situation for these communities is tenuous indeed and all the social capital in the world will be of no value at all if there are no jobs at all. Apart from tourism, the establishment of businesses in rural Australia is difficult and occurring too slowly, if at all. This was evident in the three inland towns we studied. In stark contrast, the coastal communities investigated were experiencing economic prosperity as a result of tourism and real estate development. It was interesting to note

that in these communities, considerable social problems exist but, as respondents noted, it tends to be hidden from view.

A dependence on a community's current state of social capital to deal with its problems represents an imbalance that is currently unsustainable. As government attempts to reduce its expenditure on human services, it shifts responsibility to the local level through community programs at a much lower cost by virtue of volunteers and low paid community workers. Another inappropriate strategy is the privatization of services, leaving welfare in the hands of market forces.

Ideology aside, the principal criticism of these current practices is that they are based on the false assumption that there are strong existing community structures and processes already in existence to support community-based services (Ife 2002). This study supports this assertion. Unfortunately, the Northern Rivers does not have the infrastructure to support the level of social welfare dependency it now faces. There is also a persistent issue as to whether those in most need are actually benefiting from current service delivery, which is frequently crisis-oriented rather than preventative.

The way forward would appear to be to assist communities to build social capital, to develop communities so that they can more adequately engage in community development, and form the appropriate partnerships with business and government. This approach will require a dramatic shift in thinking in policy and to some extent ideology by state and federal governments.

Social Capital and Local Government

Potentially, there is an important role for local government in developing social capital. According to Worthington and Dollery (2000) and Foldvary (1994), local government may be more important to the health of local communities than central governments given their capacity to understand what is happening at a local level. This study, however, showed that the local governments covered in this study could go further in involving themselves with issues of social disadvantage. There appears to be a preoccupation by councils with real estate, rates, roads and rubbish. This image of the role of local government may be due to the historically limited role of local government compared to their American and British counterparts (Worthington & Dollery 2000). Where local governments have, in fact, oriented themselves to community-related functions, they have achieved a great deal given this relative disadvantage.

Local government is also the victim of political ideology and partisan support for particular interests rather than necessarily providing the best for the community. We found some very negative attitudes on the part of councilors towards issues such as business opportunities, change, social capital, multiculturalism, local entrepreneurs and community consultation. In many ways neo-liberal dogma has been adopted in the thinking of councils and their response to social welfare issues could be more focused.

Our study suggested that councils could be assisted in developing their political awareness and essential strategic skills such as: identifying and supporting community

entrepreneurs who may be found outside of institutions and government; using community participation; recognizing the need for bi-partisan effort to solving problems; and developing social capital. According to Worthington and Dollery (2000, p359) the time is right with a shifting of emphasis by councils away from property-related matters to broader community-related functions. This shift of emphasis by councils in this study was identified in the shape of a number of innovative and exciting projects but resources need to be increased dramatically to create any major effect.

Issues resulting from this imbalance and solutions

A number of pressing issues were identified by respondents as contributing to the maintenance of disadvantage. These are described below.

Access to Services

Access to Services is probably the most critical issue for people living in these communities. As several community workers stated, this has been an often-noted problem for many years in reports and research about rural Australia and has never been adequately addressed. Poor access can be attributed to inadequate transport facilities and to fragmentation of services such as welfare, health, employment, education and housing, making access, particularly in the light of the transport problem, very difficult especially for those with multiple needs. Many socially disadvantaged people have mental health problems, having been displaced following the implementation of the Richmond Report two decades ago, which resulted in the shift of long-term care for the mentally ill from institutionalised to community care. These people find it even harder to access services because of their disability and are more likely to need assistance in a number of areas. Community mental health services were noted as particularly inadequate.

Bus services are relatively expensive and the service is poor in rural areas probably because it is not economically viable for private operators without a subsidy. This is especially a problem when services are located in a number of locations distanced geographically from each other. Community-based transport does exist but it is necessarily sparse because it is based on volunteers.

There is a need for cheaper, flexible transport services that provide access to essential services, education opportunities, jobs and centers. A subsidy could be provided to private bus companies to manage regular and reliable service. It was suggested that certain groups could be targeted with a coordinated effort. A transport worker could be employed to identify groups and transport projects across the region.

Access is also affected because community services appear overstretched with reports of unmanageable case-loads. It was suggested that policy makers are unaware of the real extent of the problem and that statistics, on which decisions are often made, do not reflect the true state of affairs.

Accommodation

There is a critical shortage of low cost and crisis accommodation. Many providers of cheap accommodation are being forced to close down due to rising costs. There was a

view that homelessness, particularly among the mentally ill, and lack of accommodation is ignored. Rental increases mean that people will move frequently from community to community as real estate values increase and the tourist market is exploited. They will also tend to move to more isolated areas where accommodation is cheaper but access to services is difficult because of lack of access to transport. These problems are seen as increasing among young people. Homelessness and frequent moving makes employment, job seeking and receipt of welfare notices difficult and the problem is These accommodation (and access) problems increase the likelihood of welfare and job seeking breaches for which there are rigid penalties.

It is essential that these cycles of increasing disadvantage be broken so that a platform of stability can be provided. Affordable rental properties and crisis accommodation are critical needs in the Northern Rivers. The accommodation needs to be within reach of essential services so that forward momentum rather than a downward spiral, the poverty trap, can be effected.

Employment

The issue of unemployment has been documented often and widely. It is well known that employment is important in developing social connectivity, economic prosperity of a community, hope and self-esteem. Unemployment and disadvantage increases the risk of crime and contributes to the low social capital. Latham (1998) has described how economic rationalism, globalisation and workforce restructuring have contributed to the social exclusion of people from mainstream society. One interesting local example described by a respondent in this study is the way in which local jobs get swallowed up by backpackers who are on holiday and who are prepared to work for less than award wages and without any mutual commitment.

Invisibility of social problems

There is a way in which some problems are made more ‘visible’ than others. This depends on whether a particular person or service takes up the cause on behalf of a particular group. The mentally ill for example are marginalized to the point of invisibility. The disabled and their families are becoming more invisible as are minority groups in general.

Like financial capital, social capital is only useful if you can catch someone’s attention. Youth suicide is an example of an issue that was addressed in a number of communities because the phenomenon gained media attention and certain groups addressed it by using their social capital. The evidence suggests that when a problem in fact obtains this attention then communities do in fact have the social capital to deal with them and the market and the state come to the party with funding. The question is how the most powerless in our society can in fact make a loud enough noise. As one respondent said, “it’s a question of who cares.”

A feature of developing coastal communities is the conflict between tourism and social problems. Disadvantage is emphasized by the increasing gap between the wealthy retired and tourists, and the unemployed who are bored and disillusioned. There is a perception

that the north coast is paradise on earth but this does not reflect the true state of affairs. Community workers said that many of the social problems are hidden and that the capacity to deal with them lags well behind economic development. One consequence of this is that the socially disadvantaged move to less prosperous communities. This leads to social isolation as families are separated. It was thought that the statistics to do with social disadvantage underestimated the size of the problem.

Health

One of the critical health issues for the socially disadvantaged is access, as described above. For many rural communities health care facilities are all but inaccessible without a private motor vehicle. Aboriginal people feel overwhelmed by a health care system that appears to them to be unhelpful and difficult to understand. As a result, Aboriginal people will tend to avoid mainstream health services.

One of the major problems identified is the lack and distribution of services for the mentally ill. One of the major flaws in the implementation of the Richmond Report in NSW in the 1980s was the inadequate provision of community support services. This is still being felt, as is the general paucity of public acute mental health care. Other major health problems were identified as being substance abuse among the region's youth with drugs coming freely into many communities, and men's health. Home help for the aged, terminally ill and mentally ill was noted as being inadequate.

Access to affordable health care was also identified as a problem particularly in the light of poor public transport. Fewer doctors are providing bulk billing and this creates particular problems for the disadvantaged who need to find services. A side effect of this is that it places additional stress on hospital emergency departments.

Other issues

A number of other issues were noted that did not easily fit into the categories described above. These are listed below:

- It was thought that services needed to be more coordinated across the region to get the best from available resources. One of the recent examples given of this was that of providing services for the homeless.
- Changes and increased requirements in reporting requirements by funding bodies increases costs for NGOs.
- Marketing of the coastal strip and tourism create pressure on infrastructure.
- The diminishing volunteer pool.
- Increasing cost of public liability insurance for NGOs on limited budgets.
- Less rigid approaches to job seeking and dole breaches that may be due to access, homelessness and other reasonable difficulties.
- More services for men.

Conclusion

This snapshot of five communities is a picture of extremes and contradiction. The one extreme is the wealth and prosperity associated with real estate development and tourism

on the coastal strip. Despite this wealth, the toy library in one of these towns was closed/discontinued because a volunteer could not be found to run it. Cheap tourist labour is employed in preference to locals while unemployment levels in the region are one of the highest in Australia. Invisible social problems exist under a thin veneer of an image of paradise: sun, surf and scrub. The other extreme is the struggling communities where jobs are scarce and economic conditions are poor. In the face of overwhelming social disadvantage some of these communities manage their very visible social problems in energetic and innovative ways.

The situation in the communities studied represents an imbalance in the contribution towards an effectively functioning community by the three main elements of government (at all levels), business and community. An effective partnership between these three elements needs to be developed with a view to: ensuring adequate funding for the amelioration of critical issues contributing to social disadvantage; stimulation of business and investment to create jobs and economic prosperity; and assisting communities to develop their social capital. As Lyons (2000) points out there needs to be a shift towards a partnership between government and communities and away from a purchaser/provider model.

The stumbling block to this partnership and the problem of social disadvantage may be the current preoccupation in Australia (if not the world at large) with economy over society, individualism over community, global over local, consumerism over ecology, survival of the fittest over social justice, introspection over diversity and pluralism. The current approach to welfare and the alleviation of social disadvantage needs to be reconsidered given the evidence that market approaches to the problem do not appear to be effective. There is a need to rethink the provision of community programs and consider a community development approach that breaks the current cycle of disadvantage now but is sustainable in the long term (Ife 2002).

There is a need to look carefully and vigorously for some new approaches to alleviating the problem of social disadvantage such as those proposed by the late Robert Theobald (e.g. 1997, 1999a, 1999b). This examination needs to include the people who most know what the problems are. It needs to be supported from above but driven by input from communities themselves. As Alston (2000) states, there is a need for a central strategy, local communities must be resourced adequately, and any government activity must be matched by an awareness of issues of disadvantage.

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