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Special Issue: Current Issues in Regional Australian Economic and Social Policy

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Special Issue: Current Issues in Regional Australian Economic and Social Policy

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Current Issues in Regional Australian Economic and Social Policy

Guest Editors: Peter Vitartas & Kate Charters

Introduction

Local farmers markets are a good litmus test for the mood of rural and regional Australia. It has been interesting watching the changing mood of the growers over the past years as they have progressed through periods of drought and poor prices to dealing with a changing natural environment and the changing political environment. Of significance is the change in mood of the regional sector as a result of the 2010 election and the increased recognition of rural regions that has occurred in the past six months since the election. The 2010 election has seen a shift in power back to rural regions with the ascension of independents and greens to power in the federal parliament. This political change brings with it a new focus on the value of *the bush* to Australians and its importance to the economy and wellbeing of the larger proportion of the population who reside in urban areas.

This special edition focuses specifically on regional issues of Australian's economic and social policy development. Beside the economic challenges resultant from the swings in the economy there are competing demands for natural resources, especially water, and other land uses. There are the impacts of changes in climatic conditions and associated energy usage. Further, the social impacts of population growth, settlement patterns, an ageing workforce, and changing employment effects on the provision of built and social infrastructure, regional services and amenity, add to the stressors of regional areas in Australia.

This edition begins by looking at the policy issues identified by people working closely with rural communities. Charters et al. outline an extensive study that distils six key themes from a community consultation process designed to identify policy issues which require addressing, or would be beneficial for rural communities. The broad themes span governance, the economy, infrastructure, population and social issues, natural resource use management, and cultural and land rights issues. The ideas that emerge from the study are an impressive list of suggestions drawn from across regional, rural and remote Australia to improve and obtain greater output and value from regions – the challenge now is to hone policy that will give these ideas life. A number of these issues are taken up in other papers in this edition.

Infrastructure is a reoccurring theme of academics writing on issues affecting rural communities. McGovern's opinion piece paper examines this issue through a financial lens and draws attention to the impact of interest rate variability over the past 100 years and the subsequent impact of debt financing upon infrastructure. McGovern argues that because of the nature of infrastructure's life and long lasting impact upon regions, that alternative approaches to financing projects need to be considered apart from existing debt financing methods.

While infrastructure is a long lasting resource available to communities, arguably, a more critical resource is our labour force which has been the focus of regional areas in recent times, largely because of its shortage. Cameron's paper reviews several pieces of research on regional skilled migration before concluding with some key issues and directions for future research in relation to the role and effectiveness of the regional skilled migration scheme in assisting Australia to address regional skill shortages.

From the macro to the micro and from paid employment to voluntary work, Anderson et al. discuss the significant contribution made by volunteers in community transport services and how policy is affecting regional services. While the importance of volunteer work is recognized at all levels of government it is interesting to read their findings that operational policies lack consistency across the services and that there was very little involvement of volunteers in the review of such policies leading to a disconnect between governance models and volunteer participation.

We return to the finance theme with Berry reviewing the methods of allocating taxes to regions and examining the inherent imbalances therein. Local government funding arrangements, however, provide considerable assistance to regional areas, but only in terms of local government functions. Berry goes on to examine the role of financial assistance grants in supporting regional development in Australia and argues that more can be done to address the imbalances in our funding allocation system.

Our final paper in this special edition examines another critical resource, water, in particular the water of the Murray-Darling basin and its impact on agriculture and the economy. Courvisanos' paper presents details of a prototype model of agricultural production that simulates 100 years of production for two crops and highlights the impact of water supply on crop choice and agricultural production.

This issue concludes with a review of Martin Perry's recently released book *Controversies in Local Economic Development*, which is very fitting for this special edition as many of the issues discussed in the text relate to the constituents of our rural regions in Australia.

We trust that you enjoy this special edition on issues of Australian's economic and social policy development and that the contributions enhance your understanding of the many issues facing social and economic policy development in Australia. We would like to thank all the contributors and reviewers for this special edition and of course the wonderful assistance of Amanda Shoebridge in facilitating this issue.

Sincerely,

Peter Vitartas and
Kate Charters