

**REPORT ON THE RURAL AFFAIRS WORKSHOP FOR
KEY NON-GOVERNMENT ORGANISATIONS AND
INTERGOVERNMENT RURAL AFFAIRS OFFICERS HELD
ON 17TH JUNE, 1992 IN CANBERRA**

**Sheila King
President, SPERA**

The day began with a summary of the issues raised by the intergovernmental rural affairs officers. Brian Hill, Executive Director, Agriculture and Forestry Group, D.P.I.E. emphasised the importance of the reconciliation of programmes to minimise duplication.

Julia Evans, of the Rural Communities Policy section, D.P.I.E. reported on a new guide to government funded service delivery in rural and remote Australia. The aim is to be a practical guide for policy makers, service managers and decision makers and will include principles and practical examples. This is an excellent document which should prove invaluable in its final form.

Ian Crellin, Director of Countrylink discussed the need for co-ordination of information services to avoid duplication. There is a need to address the needs of the client and avoid being driven by technology. If Government data is more accessible for planning purposes and an exchange of information occurs then there is scope for harmonisation between departments, state and commonwealth services. Commitment from appropriate agencies will be important for the successful co-ordination of information as will the need to promote the availability of information.

Frank McClelland, Director of the office of Rural Affairs in Victoria a community development approach to assist rural and remote communities manage change. The need to involve communities more in programmes and the decisions to include programmes was highlighted. To assist this process a linking mechanism or co-ordination will be needed to allow local groups to explore their needs and ways to respond.

Fourteen non-government organisations were represented at the workshop which was a great opportunity to discuss common concerns. Key issues raised were:

- Rural issues need to be an integral part of the national agenda not an "add on"
- Implementation of generated ideas needs to be considered
- Access to education and services needs to be made more equitable
- Quality of service is important to rural and remote clients
- Community participation and consultation is essential and feedback to the community is a necessary step in this process
- Need for co-ordination of policy statements

Lindsay McDonald, Remote Telephone Subscribers Association, presented a discussion paper on the concept of developing a coalition of non-government organisation. Remoteness from metropolitan centres and the dispersion of people often makes it very difficult for rural people to promote their position. A rural affairs coalition could interact

Education in Rural Australia, Vol 2 (2) Page 56

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more effectively with governments and promote a better and more holistic approach to meeting rural needs.

The concept of this paper was accepted by the non-government organisations and a steering committee was established to commence work:

Lindsay McDonald, Remote Telephone Subscribers Association

Sheila King, Society for the Provision of Education in Rural Australia

Bruce Cullen, Rural and Resources Press Club, N.F.F.

Bev Thornton, Council of Remote Area Nurses of Australia

Dick Osborn, Australian Local Government Association

John Hill, Rural Ministry Project

The steering committee will establish a mission statement, objectives and management issues for circulation to all other organisations represented. This exciting initiative will give rural groups another voice and help put rural Australia on the National agenda.

This full day workshop was most productive and will be repeated in twelve months time. The opportunity for government and non-government personnel to discuss issues and concerns in this way provides a wide perspective and the opportunity to work towards productive outcomes.

Throughout the sessions all non-government organisations were given an opportunity to speak on key concern. My presentation is included here:

The Notion of Rural Disadvantage

Much has been written about rural education, identifying the need to provide an education for rural students which is as comprehensive in opportunity scope and quality as the education provided for urban students. In fact, for many years now rural educators have attempted to ignore the differences and modelled the urban "ideal", often to the detriment of the rural students. Clearly the focus has been to adapt the urban model to compensate for rural disadvantage.

SPERA strongly rejects the cliches of rural disadvantage and suggests it is time to treat all learners with equal value. There is a need to approach the provision of education in a novel way. There are numerous, isolated examples of creative, exciting approaches to the provision of education in rural areas which are totally appropriate. The goal now is to expand this provision and spread the achievements to incorporate all education provision to rural areas. No longer should we attempt equal provision amongst schools and educational service providers but rather an inequitable approach may be appropriate to ensure that the highest quality education is achieved for all learners. We now need to consider equal outcomes as opposed to equal provisions.

SPERA recommends that there is a need to improve the degree of community participation in equity programmes right from the local school level through to the state and Commonwealth level. Often the rural community is presented with a "fait accompli" and is then required to modify the model to suit the local needs. Many initiatives aimed at improving education and training have been under resourced and inflexible, therefore not

catering for local needs. The NBEET report 'Toward a National Education and Training Strategy for Rural Australians' published in June 1991 states "there is clearly a need for better co-ordination across the States, between the States and the Commonwealth, and across the various sectors of the education and training continuum to bring initiative into the mainstream of education and training provision" (p. 51). Following this report there have been many reports and enquiries which will affect rural education and training. SPERA recognises the need to disseminate information developments, programmes and policies in rural education and is prepared to take a leading role as a clearing house in this regard. This could then be one branch of a Rural Affairs Coalition as suggested by Lindsay Macdonald in her paper.

One area of national concern that needs to be examined in greater detail is an alternative access to education and other services. Rural communities often adapt more readily to the use of technology to compensate for geographic isolation and poor access. There is a need to co-ordinate the use of technological initiatives so that all sectors of a community can take full advantage and resources are utilised in the most efficient way. The technology is available, the challenge is to provide for integration through rural communities, industry, non-government organisations and all levels of government.

Jenny Delroy, Senior Policy Advisor for the Rural and Provincial Policy Unit, D.P.I.E. spoke on the issue of transport in rural and remote Australia at the SPERA national conference in 1991. This paper identified access as the most significant problem facing rural Australian education and training and suggested the following factors as points to maximise access:

- Consultation
- Co-ordination of policies at a local level
- Focus on outcomes
- Utilise existing resources

These points highlight major concerns for rural communities and identify the factors which need to be addressed regarding all rural issues.