Regional, Rural and Remote Communities

Queensland is the most decentralised state in Mainland Australia. 47.5% of Queenslanders live in areas classified by the Australian Bureau of Statistics as regional and remote. In Queensland certain groups of people are definitely more vulnerable to poverty including people living in rural, regional and remote communities.

QCOSS highlights the particular pressures on rural and remote areas in Queensland – these will be further exacerbated by the recession and, potentially, by some of this year’s budget measures. Investment in regional, rural and remote Queensland has largely focused on infrastructure and economics. We again implore the government to deliver adequate levels of service, and facilitate reliable access to these services, through ongoing attention to regional development mechanisms, and initiatives under Blueprint for the Bush.

There is increasing evidence that communities that do best are those with strong, diverse and innovative local leadership, active citizens and good connections to what is going on in and beyond their communities. There is also evidence that communities and individuals with strong networks and trusting relationships achieve better results in education, health, safety and economic performance.

Key Issues

Consultation with our members and stakeholders, including a growing number of rural and regional communities, highlighted the following key issues:

- **Access to health and other support** services — One of the major issues affecting community sustainability in rural and remote Queensland is a lack of, or uncertain access to, a basic level of health and human services. This encompasses health, education and a variety of human and intervention services. People often have to leave the community and travel some distance to access services. Compounding this issue is the affordability and reliability of transport options in many rural and remote areas.

**Multiple Disadvantage**

Some Queenslanders are far more likely to suffer poverty and social exclusion. And the effects are multiplied when individuals and families belong to more than one group.

QCOSS recognises the serious disadvantage faced by:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities
- People in rural and remote communities
- Culturally and linguistically diverse communities
- People with a disability
- Young people
- Older people
- Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender communities
People in rural areas are at great risk of poor physical and emotional wellbeing due to limited access to specialist services. Mental health and counselling support services are often non-existent or provided on an irregular, outreach basis in rural and remote communities. Similarly, early learning opportunities for children, family support and adult education opportunities are limited, thereby creating a greater sense of social isolation.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders and people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse (CALD) backgrounds face additional barriers including discrimination and lack of cultural responsiveness by health and human services. Lack of access to Interpreters/and or poor use of interpreters by service providers and departments greatly exacerbate this problem.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people living in rural and remote communities experience a significant level of disadvantage in terms of education and employment, health and wellbeing, housing, mortality rates and involvement in the criminal justice system.

In rural and regional areas there can be an extremely diverse migrant community although very few established cultural groups may exist. The ‘invisibility’ of CALD individuals and groups presents a real challenge to engaging the community and providing appropriate support and information services.

CALD communities, particularly refugees and people of 457 visas, face additional barriers including discrimination in the rental market, lack of information about their rights and responsibilities and lack of documentation, for example references and work history.

For young people and their families from CALD backgrounds, schools in rural and regional areas often lack ESL support and schools are poorly equipped to meet their cultural needs.

Community service sector capacity – including recruitment and retention of staff, high turn over rates, limited professional development opportunities, inflexible service delivery, resource limitations, time taken up with travel, inadequate outreach services, and pressure to compete with Government and the private sector for staff. This creates a substantial drain on scarce resources as organisations frequently have to advertise multiple times to fill positions. The inability to fill positions results in a time delay and means communities can be without vital services for months at a time.

Rural areas often consist of a number of small community organisations, with a single full-time or part-time funded position to service the community. These positions are often expected to extend their services to surrounding remote communities. The ‘one-worker model’ is an inefficient model of service delivery and adds to staff ‘burn out’.

Organisations in rural and regional areas are concerned about the existence and sustainability of vital, small “grassroots” community organisations due to pressures of compliance, competitive tendering processes and increasing costs associated with administration and service delivery.

Outreach services – there is concern with an increasing trend to fund outreach services for rural areas which raises a number of issues - not being accepted by the community, unreliability and infrequency of visiting services, and limited availability of space and facilities.

Housing – The lack of available and affordable housing is a major issue in rural and remote areas of Queensland. There is a general lack of appropriate and affordable housing for community members living in rural and remote locations and people are often relocated further away from employment, opportunities, education and other services.
Estimates provided by the Office of Economic and Statistical Research (OESR) indicate that overcrowding for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples increased significantly with remoteness, as did the disparity between Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander and non-Indigenous levels of overcrowding.

Lack of accommodation for service providers is a huge barrier to service delivery for rural and regional areas. People are unable to relocate to a rural area for employment if there is no accommodation available.

“We have a little bit of everything …and not enough of anything. Our service base is too sparse”.

Recognising Progress

QCOSS recognises the following investment made by the Queensland Government:

- *Blueprint for the Bush* — a 10-year plan to build a strong rural Queensland of sustainable, liveable and prosperous communities. In particular, $5.4 million for the establishment of Rural Multi-Tenant Service Centres; $3 million for Rural Service Access Initiative; $7.42 million for Our Place, Our Future initiative; and Building Rural Links.

QCOSS Recommendations

- Develop flexible human service delivery models in regional, rural and remote Queensland incorporating Community Hubs and Resource Centre models. QCOSS advocates for an integrated approach which would ensure quality, coordinated service provision in rural and remote Queensland.

An integrated model of human service delivery in regional, rural and remote Queensland should incorporate the following elements:

- Innovative and coordinated systems of service delivery
- Collaborative partnership arrangements between service providers
- Funding which is flexible and reflects distance, isolation and travel costs
- Communication and information technology opportunities
- Workforce issues and strategies
- Compliance and administration support
- Regional and local NGO representation and promotion
- NGO advocacy strategies

- Continue to strengthen and promote initiatives within Blueprint for the Bush. In particular allocating new funds and applying a strategic approach to promotion and implementation of project initiatives for rural Queensland within the Blueprint for the Bush.
QCOSS Policy Position – November 2009

- Ensure the interests and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are adequately represented in rural and remote Queensland with particular reference to Land Management, Cultural Heritage, Community Control and Leadership, and the delivery of culturally competent services.

- Greater support for people from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse Communities including:
  - more multicultural focused positions within mainstream services;
  - increased and sustained strategies to increase cultural competency of services and government departments;
  - increased use of bicultural workers and ESL teachers support within schools; and
  - increased strategies to provide information to CALD communities about their rights, responsibilities on a range of areas including housing, employment, child safety and education.

1 RRR fact sheet
2 Poverty in Queensland, QCOSS, 2006
3 OESR 2001

This paper is part of QCOSS’s ‘policy platform’ that contains over 20 policy papers.

Go to www.qcoss.org.au for other papers including – Mental Health, Violence Prevention, and Social Inclusion.