Drought in the 1990s
Australian Farm Families' Experiences

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Resilient Agricultural Systems Research and Development
Foreword

Drought has brought recurring disaster since the settlement of rural Australia. Battling against it has become part of Australian tradition and has been seen symbolically to reinforce the cohesion of Australian society. Nevertheless, anecdotal 'stories' and media reporting continue to remain the main sources of information and provide less than reliable evidence for decision making by key stakeholders. Often the mythology of 'the Australian bush' obscures the reality of the lived experience of those families who, in the 1990s, have experienced a drought of up to six seasons.

The long term impact of the drought on the consciousness of families and on their relationships with their communities were the focus of a two year (1995-1997) collaborative study undertaken by the Rural Social and Economic Research Centre at Central Queensland University and the Centre for Rural Social Research at Charles Sturt University.

Over 100 producers were interviewed on 56 properties in the beef producing area of Central Queensland and the sheep/wheat producing area of the western rangelands of New South Wales.

In-depth interviewing with producers from both regions, combined with policy and media analysis, interviews with key stakeholders and a major literature review have resulted in 'a social construction of drought'.

This report, jointly funded by RIRDC and the Land and Water Resources Research and Development Corporation, is the latest addition to our diverse range of over 250 research publications, forms part of our Resilient Agricultural Systems Research and Development program which aims to enable agricultural production systems that have sufficient diversity, flexibility and robustness to be resilient and respond to challenges and opportunities.

Most of our publications are available for viewing, downloading or purchasing online through our website at www.rirdc.gov.au/pub/cat/contents.html

Peter Core
Managing Director
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We particularly offer our heartfelt thanks to all those women and men in Central Queensland and in New South Wales who have shared with us their heartaches, joys, and insights. Their perceptions can only add to an understanding of the social construction of drought and we hope that our recounting of their narratives in this way will enable those of us who do not live in rural Australia to better appreciate and begin to understand their lived experiences.

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Executive Summary

This Report details a two-year study undertaken with farm families (in Central Queensland and the western rangelands of New South Wales) focussing on their experiences (at the level of individual, family and community) while in drought during 1995 and 1996. The study has developed a social construction of drought based on: stock, water and soil management strategies; family and community relationships; effectiveness of drought policies; individual and family health and strategies for future recovery.

The main findings of the report are:

• Families are the first line of defence against the hardship of drought
• Men and women experience drought differently
• Producers strive for self-reliance
• Producers do manage risk
• Producers do try to plan and operate sustainably
• Producers do have an environmental consciousness
• Producers do undertake ‘whole-farm’ strategic planning
• Their communities should not be taken for granted
• Drought policy has unintended consequences
• ‘Experts’ can cause additional stress
• Human service responses require better integration
• Producers express cynicism about the media
• Rural Australia feels isolated from, and abandoned by, urban Australia
• Further sociological research is urgently required

The study found that defining drought is more complex now than in the past due to two factors (1) a shift in government policy and (2) more sophisticated technologies of measurement. Drought is therefore conceptualised as ‘not some specific defined event’ but instead it ‘represents the risk that existing agricultural activity may not be sustainable, given spatial and temporal variations in rainfall and other climatic conditions’ (DPRTF Report, 1990:3). As the Report discusses, this is in contrast to historical notions of drought as being equivalent to events such as natural disasters - ie floods, fire and cyclones.
This study was conducted a framework of social constructivism wherein a social ‘reality’ of drought is viewed in terms of the often-shared, multiple and largely experientially-based knowledges of rural producers. The study was undertaken within a philosophy that there is no ‘correct’ view of drought: all views are equally valid (in terms of their own experience), even if the consequences of those views act to produce ‘negative’ real-world outcomes such as resource depletion, family malaise or community decline. The approach elicits a number of responses from which a more general understanding might be distilled.

Components of this methodology included focus groups, face-to-face discussions with both male and female producers, with second in-depth interviews with nine producers to develop case studies; discussions with government and other agents involved in drought relief, and an evaluation of governmental policies (and media and other) reports. Such ‘triangulation’ (as it is known in the methodology of the social sciences) provides a powerful basis for evaluating the ways the views of producers inform social practice - in this case how producers construct and then deal with drought.

As a largely qualitative, actor-focused approach, this study seeks to explore attitudes and values as a basis for informing social action. It follows, therefore, that the results of the research should be capable not only of providing producers with a new understanding of drought and new options, but also of informing government about the ways producers interpret and act upon ‘drought’. In the latter case it is hoped that new policy initiatives which act to assist in the protection of resources may emerge. We anticipate that it would also enable an informed long-term management strategy to be developed which would assist government and rural adjustment and counselling agencies in their activities.
Introduction
Objectives

2.1 Research Context

This chapter outlines the objectives established for the study. As discussed in the previous chapter, the framework of ‘social construction’ of drought (method discussed in more detail in the next chapter) identifies issues at the level of individual - family - community. The 1990s drought, which affected broadly the area from the Gulf of Carpentaria in the north, to Gippsland in the south and the Eyre Peninsula to the west, has not previously been - as far as we are able to discern - investigated by sociologists. Located at the Rural Social and Economic Research Centre at Central Queensland University in Rockhampton, Queensland and in the Centre for Rural Social Research at Charles Sturt University in Wagga Wagga, New South Wales, the chief investigators were ideally placed to undertake a comparative analysis of the way drought has been ‘experienced’ in both regions. Both regions studied remained in drought declared status during the two years of the project. All individuals involved in the study did so voluntarily.

2.2 Research Objectives

This research project had two aims:
First, to begin to understand the way in which drought is socially constructed and how such constructions influence on-farm drought strategies. This includes consideration about the conditions in which people start to act as though there is a drought.
Second, to identify and analyse when and in what ways resource management strategies used by farm families were altered during the recently experienced drought.

Analysis focussed on the way in which drought comes to be considered ‘normal’ or ‘abnormal’. It explored changes in the culture of farming through which drought has been perceived during recent experience on farms and how sustainable production options have been undermined as conditions deteriorated. The project used as its framework the key sociological variables of age, gender and education, which we hypothesised influenced attitudes to drought as well as to existing structural adjustment options. Farmers' concerns about past and new drought policy were also evaluated.

The overall research was guided by the following questions which formed the basis of our focus group discussions, our interviews with individuals and our interviews with stakeholders:

- How do farmers and their families come to perceive that a drought is threatening? How does this vary according to farm management style and values?
- How have the families who have determined to stay on the land made the strategic management decisions which allow them to do so?
• What strategic decisions did they make to balance risk taking and conservation? What relationship do these decisions have with farm management style?

• How does the family share the decision-making process? How is this process undertaken?

• What impact do the attitudes and values of the farm woman have?

• What role does ‘drought assistance’ in all its forms play in decision making?

• Has there been a change in culture regarding responses to drought - from government, and from the farming community?

The interview questionnaire can be found at Attachment A.

In Chapter 4 we detail the findings derived from our narratives and link them back to the objectives outlined above.
Method

3.1 Overview of study
The study has been undertaken by comparing farm families in two disparate regions affected by the drought (1989 - 1996) - one in Central Queensland (beef) and one in the Riverina (sheep/wheat). All those interviewed were volunteers, strict confidentiality was assured and pseudonyms are used throughout this report. Farm families were initially identified through contacts within each region followed with a 'snowball' effect, with families recommending other families. This chapter outlines the methodology used in more detail.

One hundred and three adults on 56 farms in the Western Riverina and in Central Queensland were questioned in considerable depth about their experiences during 1995 and 1996. Questions covered their family and personal backgrounds, their farms and their experience of drought in terms of farm and household management, the ways in which they perceived and managed drought, financial implications, quality of life and health effects, community support, government policies and the future. Men and women were interviewed separately. Of the total group, 52 were women and 51 were men. There were 25 women interviewed in Central Queensland and 24 men; 27 women interviewed in New South Wales and 27 men. On two occasions in NSW two wives refused to be interviewed and in CQ one defacto husband refused to be interviewed. There was one widow interviewed in both NSW and in CQ. In CQ one never-married and one divorced man and in NSW one unmarried man were interviewed. Their average age is in the 45-49 years group with a number in Central Queensland over 55 years. They are, on average, experienced farmers, having operated farms for a mean of 25 years (with a range from 1 to 54 years, but with only 8 having less than 10 years experience). Their average size of properties is 9,000 hectares: 5,138 hectares for the Queensland sample and 18,511 hectares for the New South Wales sample. Half the farms are entirely dedicated to grazing with only 8 farms using less than 50 per cent of their land for grazing.

3.2 A constructivist approach - narratives of experience
The drought of the early to mid 1990s is thought to have been one of the worst on record. That this is, itself, simply a ‘claim’ - and that drought severity is something which cannot be accurately and ‘objectively’ determined (see West and Smith, 1996) - may come as a surprise to some. However, despite advances in meteorological knowledge and our understanding of such things as the El Nino effect and the importance in rainfall patterns of the movement of the Southern Oscillation Index, it is, as this research argues, the social construction of drought that is at issue. This study adopts combination of approaches, not designed to produce some supposed sociological ‘truth’, but to explore views and attitudes of social actors within ‘multiple, interpretive communities’ (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994:15). The interpretive design is embedded firmly within a constructivist approach to the understanding of social phenomena. It is one which allows for what Guba and Lincoln (1989:84) have described as a ‘dialectic of iteration, analysis, critique, reiteration (and) reanalysis’.
The largely qualitative approach has the advantages of flexibility (in the eliciting of responses) and ‘actor-centredness’.

In this report we discuss the way in which conventional assessments of drought have tended to ‘frame’ the dominant discourses. Mostly, as we argue, these are scientific/technological discourses which involve rainfall deficiency, the period of deficiency, and rainfall variability. We also discuss the way in which this discourse has come to frame government policies in more detail in Chapter 5. We suggest that farm management under drought conditions is now viewed as a ‘challenge’ one which producers should be planning for ahead of time. As a so-called ‘normal feature of the Australian climate, and hence, of agriculture’ (Land Management Task Force, 1995:31) drought is something the individual producers now needs to anticipate as a normal event, and thus plan for it. This is despite strong arguments from all producers interviewed during this study that the length of the drought is something no-one can plan for.

Lemert (1995:269) describes discourse as being within an ‘uncomfortable social space in which knowledge is no longer the foundation of that which is’, where instead language both is the universal problematic and, insofar as ‘knowledge; is concerned, is all that is’. As such, a discursive approach would demand the ‘uprooting of deeply ingrained convictions’ including dualities such as subject/object and acceptance of the scientific model of knowledge (1995:269). Miller (1993:xvi) describes discourse as an ‘area in which knowledge is produced and operates, both overtly and in a less than overt way. It fixes norms, elaborates criteria and hence makes it possible to speak of and treat a given problem at a particular time’. Such discourses are formed socially, culturally, historically, politically and economically. In other words, we can have conflicting discourses about the same issue but some discourses predominate and become the ones within which others are framed. Some discourses will support and promote the essential status quo, while others will offer a resistance to it. In the process of the resistance, the dominant discourse(s) will ‘marginalize and dismiss the alternative voices’ (Weedon, 1987:35). The way in which discourses are structured also determines who is able to participate in them, and who is marginalised from them. A more detailed explanation of the theoretical basis for the study we utilised can be read in Stehlik et al (1996a).

### 3.3 A framework for analysis

The methodology underpinning the study was developed using a constructivist approach (Guba and Lincoln, 1989; Denzin and Lincoln, 1994) to allow for the unit of analysis to be at the farm (environmental), family (individual) and stakeholder (community) level. It consisted of three components: **focus group discussions** - both with male and female producers as well as combined groups which included other stakeholders, such as extension officers, environmental officers, doctors, rural nurses, community development personnel and local small business owners. **Semi-structured interviews** - with the same questions being asked of both husband and wife in separate interviews conducted on the same day in their home. These interview questionnaires were derived first, from themes which emerged from the early focus group discussions, second, adapting some questions used in *Coping with Change*
and third, developing specialised questions for drought conditions, such as those on water. Central to the study methodology was also a **single case study** design, which was developed from follow up interviews with a number of producers. An interesting and unique approach was utilised to ‘find’ these families. In both regions we began with focus groups - of both male and female producers - these then allowed us to develop an early understanding of issues which were then incorporated into the semi-structured questionnaire designed for the interviews. These focus groups then also commenced the process of contacting other interested families. We asked members of these groups to recommend other producers, usually their neighbours or friends, who would be interested in participating in the study. The point is, for the purposes of this study, it was not necessary to randomly sample the farm population.

Obtaining an indication of experience, attitude and interpretation - the ‘range of experience’ in two separate settings was sufficient.

### 3.4 Gathering the data

We adopted, from Erlandson *et al.*, (1993) a number of strategies which need to be adopted in order to begin to develop the ‘comprehensive intensive interpretation of (various) realities’ (1993:31) necessary for a constructivist enquiry of this nature. These key strategies, and the way in which we incorporated them are:

#### 3.4.1 Prolonged engagement:

The two areas under study were both within the geographic boundaries of the Research Centres, and both Universities have a history of involvement with communities and farm families in the regions concerned. We were fortunate that the project was developed over a period of two years - a time period which enabled comparison, discussion, reflection and comparative analysis. Focus groups were developed to allow the issues of common concern to emerge and to allow differences between families to be identified. Ten focus groups (male/female and combined) with an average of 8 members, were developed - 5 in each region. Some of these focus groups consisted of stakeholders from various sectors of the agricultural community.

#### 3.4.2 Persistent Observation:

The value of open-ended questions and the allocation of enough time to enable the participants to begin to explore their thoughts and feelings was essential. We undertook some of the focus group discussions prior to the individual interviewing as a way of beginning to identify emerging ‘patterns’. Other focus groups were conducted after the interviewing had been completed as a form of ‘member checking’. In this context too, learning, understanding, and appreciating and using the language of the participants was important in establishing trust with them. This, in turn, enabled what Erlandson *et al.*, (1993:30) call a ‘credible outcome’ - one that ‘adequately represents both the areas in which these realities converge and the points on which they diverge’ to be produced during the research process. Information about the families who have lived through the drought was collected from taped, face-to-face interviews with (usually) husband and wife. In some cases only one partner was interviewed. In other cases the respondent was a widow or not married. The semi-structured format encouraged attitudes and opinions

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associated with gender, age and other differences to emerge from the discussions (see Minichello, 1990). The interviews provided us with 103 detailed statements the contents of which form the basis for this report.

3.4.3 Triangulation: While the central focus of the study was the families in both regions, we were also conscious of the need to gather different narratives from other crucial sources. We have identified, for example, district agronomists from government agencies, farm financial counsellors, and rural support workers as those who have provided insights into the affects of drought in particular regions. We considered these views in the context of the focus discussions held among the farmers, in order to being to identify different constructions of reality (in this case, among farmers and ‘experts’). Single case study design was used to explore the social construction of drought through the lived experience of nine farm families chosen from both regions. Our rationale for this methodological approach rests with what Yin (1984) calls the 'revelatory case'. Here, as the researcher has access to a situation or a phenomenon that has previously not been researched - the case study is ‘worth conducting because the descriptive information alone will be revelatory’ (Yin, 1984:43). The case studies are discussed in more detail in Chapters 6-10.

3.4.4 Referential Adequacy Methods: We are aware that there is a great resource of visual material already available through the printed and television media. While not directly central to the project this information may, nevertheless, be helpful in future in undertaking a photographic study with a view (in the long term) to publishing our research in a way which foregrounds the voices and photographs to provide a more ‘holistic view of the context’ (Erlandson et al., 1993: 31).

3.4.5 Member checking: The project was underpinned our commitment as social scientists to principles of social justice, reciprocity and ethics. The interviews were conducted by experienced researchers who understood the need for sensitivity, diplomacy (Reinharz, 1992). We came to appreciate that our interviews were often the first opportunity (outside the family) that the respondents had to discuss these experiences. We were therefore very conscious of the responsibility we had in terms of moral, ethical and political consequences (Finch, 1984). To this end, all individuals interviewed were asked to complete a consent form and the project was submitted to ethics committees at both Universities.

3.4.6 Peer Debriefing: We were fortunate to be working in a collegial way on this project. Indeed, it would be difficult to imagine undertaking a study of this nature in any other way. We believe that this opportunity to begin to develop a theoretical framework in regard to the social construction of drought has already and will continue to add to the body of knowledge within rural sociology. Where the interviews have provided us with a broad range of responses, the case studies enable a ‘richness’ of comparative understanding of how some farm families have coped successfully while others have been less successful. While the methodology was labour-intensive, we believe this might be an advantage in that these approaches have value in situations such as the current drought where there is a clear lack of sociological understanding of what is occurring on Australian farms.
3.5 ‘Rhizomatic’ sampling as a research technique

Field research is characterised by an analysis of respondents in their everyday life. Gaining access to these groups of individuals under study can be problematic as the naturalistic inquiry aims for a non-intrusive approach coupled with principles of confidentiality and anonymity. Sampling that is compatible to field research is not based on mathematical probabilities and validity commonly called random processes (Neuman 1990:218). A more suitable qualitative method of sampling that is interactional and less structural is often termed ‘snowball sampling’ (Jones, 1996:144 see also Ford, 1975) or, as we have more accurately named it ‘rhizomatic’ sampling\(^2\). We believe that our experiences in this study are different from more traditional approaches to ‘snowball sampling’ and thus offer a unique set of data as narratives. The concept of ‘rhizomatic’ is something which has emerged as a result of our work in this study.

The parameters of this interaction are not defined by lines but are determined by ‘cultural factors’ and ‘interconnected network[s] of people’ (Neuman 1990:199). The linkages of these networks provide other sources of enquiry that do not necessarily mean direct knowledge and/or influence of each other but a common third person link (Neuman 1990:200). Kreuger (1994:84-85) suggests such sampling for focus group participants who would then nominate others for further enquiry. In this study, focus group participants provided our first contacts for the next stage of our methodology which was interviewing in the field.

Mapping the networks of the rhizomatic sample (sociograms) are often used to illustrate the extent and depth of the networks and can provide further analysis of the level of interaction. These diagrammatic features may be useful to identify a common person or community that may be a focal point of a study. The sociograms may also highlight some limitations of such sampling such as a too small or too large a network (Neuman 1990:218) and may indicate bias. Another limitation of this form of sampling is the assumption of a surviving network. In our study, the network of the farming community is under threat due to drought which may implicate the extent and depth of our rhizomatic sample. Maps of the regions under study by broadly (not specifically in order to maintain confidentiality) highlighting those general area of those properties which participated in the study are found in this Report.

In both regions key informants assisted in the process of developing the rhizomatic sample. These key informants were vital in recommending some particularly drought affected farmers and those in especially difficult situations - in both family and financial terms. For example, in the New South Wales region, the key informant was a member of the community who had been actively involved in the fight to have the area recognised as a drought declared area (an extremely contentious issue - when neighbouring shires had been drought declared for some time) and hence be eligible for the Rural Adjustment Scheme's Drought 'exceptional circumstances' subsidy. In Central Queensland the key informant was a member of the education community and a grazier. In addition, in Central Queensland radio publicity also resulted in a number of families contacting us with an interest in participating in the interviews.

\(^2\)‘Rhizomatic sampling’ is derived from the botanical ‘rhizome’ meaning ‘forming subterranean rootlike stems’. It is used here to avoid the term ‘snowball’ which is largely incongruous given the subject matter as drought.
In the broader interviews we asked the respondents to focus on the management strategies they had adopted in the 1990s drought which they had learned from previous dry or drought experiences. In the re-interviews we conducted with the members of the case study groups, we concentrated on soil, livestock breeding, water supply, environmental and management decisions and major decisions about the family. Our case study respondents were drawn from the larger study for two key reasons:

- to begin to identify management practices over extended periods of drought
- as singular exemplars of particular forms of property management practice.

Thus we were able to centre on the key themes of our study - water, stock, soil, environment, family and community. We re-interviewed four families in NSW and four in CQ. In addition, in Central Queensland we also re-interviewed a female beef producer - a widow aged over 70 years - working her property alone.
3.6 Research reflections

Our experience has affirmed the strength of the methodological approach, which we believe both acknowledges the central role of those whose lives have been affected by the drought by both valuing their experiences as central to the study, as well as providing us with rich ‘thick’ data for analysis. While there is certainly no single ‘truth’ emerging, nevertheless it should be stated clearly that we have taken steps, within our research design and administration, to ask serious questions and to treat respondents seriously. There is no reason to believe that the respondents did otherwise.

However there have been some limitations. First, within the objectives of this study, we interviewed only those who have remained on their properties through the drought and therefore we cannot comment as to whether their views and attitudes are different from those who have been forced to abandon their properties. Therefore we do not have a direct understanding of why some producers fail and others survive and how those who have failed ‘construct’ drought. This should form the basis of future research. Second, due to time and resource constraints, the sample is largely beef producers and wheat/sheep producers. It is therefore not possible to generalise about the ‘drought experience’ outside these industries or these regions. Third, a ‘one-off’ survey provides cross sectional data. It may be difficult to establish the ‘lived experiences’ of drought-affected producers as they have occurred over time. However, the case studies are expected to assist us in this regard. Finally, rhizomatic sampling contains the potential for bias. One difficulty is to establish whether or not the experiences we report are typical ones or ones of a ‘self selecting’ group which may/may not represent the range of experience of producers within the industry. However we believe that our triangulation and our comparison with other studies of farm families under stress mitigate against this potential bias.

Finally, we wish to take this opportunity to formally acknowledge with thanks the generous contribution our respondents in Central Queensland and New South Wales made of their time in sharing their experiences for this study.
Summary of findings - A Social Construction of Drought

It is easy to expect magic wands when there simply aren’t any. I can’t be held responsible for the fact that we have got an appalling price outlook for the beef industry nor for seasonable circumstances, and I think that colours people’s perspectives a great deal (John Anderson. Federal Primary Industries Minister quote in The Australian 22 July 1997:4).

There are two businesses - the business of owning the property and the business of running it. You have got two identities there. You can be asset rich and cash poor quite easily. If you look at it as a business investment, the most obvious thing to do to battle your way through these natural disasters is to go away and do off farm business .... have something else which will take up the slack at that time when the other business is not doing so well [but] not everyone can do that. In the years gone by people were able to get through drought because the whole thing made sense to be there [because] the return in relation to your outgoings was there. Now your return is [low], and your outgoings are still [high] and there is no relativity to the whole situation. That is my point -it changes the whole context (Male former beef producer, CQ,1995).

4.1 Drought and its impact

The two quotes above provide the current context in which this Report is framed. Despite the decade-long drought, farmers and policy makers are still not ‘speaking the same language’ - the discourses of drought remain as diverse as those individuals involved in their social construction. For the Minister of Primary Industry and Energy - beef producers’ complaints are rejected because, according to him, the Federal Government is doing everything it can. According to many of the producers we spoke to, the Government’s understanding of their position is limited, stereotyped and misrepresented.

Our study has attempted to show, through the narratives of individual experiences, that the drought is not something objectively ‘true’ but must be viewed in terms of its potential as ‘discourse’ to favour some sections of the community over others. We are not arguing that drought is presented (constructed) by rural producers, and fed to the media by producers, in ways which enhance their ability to seek compensation from governments. Such an argument suggests that by constructing drought as a natural phenomenon rather than a failure to plan, producers are able at one and the same time, to swing public opinion behind the need to assist the ‘victims’ of natural events, and to pressure governments to provide financial assistance to struggling producers - irrespective of whether it was those producers who were at ‘fault’ for having contributed to the severity of the on-farm consequences of periods of severe rainfall deficiency. While there is virtue in an approach which exposes the ideologies which accompany the onset of ‘drought’ and explores the ways specific interests are able to mobilise political support, it nevertheless fails to enable any understanding of lived experience, as such an analysis is detached from the interpretive experiences of those who face drought. Importantly, the on-farm effects of drought are not, in such cases, usually investigated.
This Report has undertaken an approach which integrates farmers’ views, attitudes, ideologies, and cultural values into a critical and structurally-based account of farming. In other words, an understanding of the ‘lived experience’ of drought and an evaluation of the impacts of those particular interpretations. We suggest here that ‘drought’ is more than a word - it is about management and that those respondents to our study understand this only too well. In other words, drought still is a lack of rain for those who suffer most from it. However, ‘managing’ does have a lot of unintended consequences which makes treating drought as just a matter for management potentially contradictory and self-defeating.

4.2 Consequences of drought for farm families

From the findings in this study we argue that the issue of what we mean by ‘rural’ Australia becomes crucial in any struggle to challenge the dominant discourses of drought in this country. Imposing ‘rural’ as a label acts to homogenise what are in reality a wide variety of settlement types outside the capitals. There is a tendency to accept the considerable differences between rural and more distant (remote) regions of Australia as the latter are seen to be disadvantaged compared to the former and to require special consideration in relation to human service delivery in particular but also other forms of services. This research, however, offers some important issues for reflection on the following issues raised by the producers and discussed in detail in the following chapters. These consequences have impact at individual, family, community and policy levels.

4.2.1 Droughts do cause hardship

- Droughts do inflict considerable hardship, not just on farm families, but on their wider communities. Conditions associated with drought have potentially harmful effects on those who try to cope with them.

- Regardless of definitions, periods of less than average rainfall have the potential to create hardship conditions in association with other factors beyond the control of farmers, especially the costs of production and prices of outputs.

4.2.2 Families are the first line of defence

- Producers do call on their families in times of hardship. Family members make themselves available for extra work to support the farm and the family.

- This burden is not necessarily distributed equitably among family members.

- Relations between the genders and the generations can become problematic and made more difficult by climatic uncertainty, on top of the uncertainties of costs and markets.

4.2.3 Men and women experience drought differently

- Women and men do experience the stresses and hardships caused by drought differently.
Those couples who shared the burden through shared decision making found the partnership strengthened and supportive.

Male producers are beginning to understand the vital role their spouses play in maintaining their properties.

Role changes between spouses need to be better integrated and supported both within families and by external agencies of support (such as counselling).

4.2.4 Producers strive for self-reliance
- Producers manage their properties in conditions (not just climatic) which are not of their own choice. The nature of the international economic system leaves little room for producers to exercise choice.

- Support is welcomed but it is not desired. Producers seek self-sufficiency. There is an implicit exchange process in the producer’s approach to assistance. ‘If you can help us now we will be able to do a lot more for you in the future without your help’. This is a different interpretation to that which labels producers as ‘over-stockers’ anticipating help when they get into trouble.

4.2.5 Producers do manage risk
- Producers do see themselves as risk managers. The culture of farming is a culture of risk-taking.

- Producers do understand the need to manage effectively. They do respond to climatic and economic forces and are aware of the need for risk management. They do take steps to prepare for the predictable and the unpredictable as far as they reasonably can. While there may be some who do not do these things as well as they might, it is incorrect to portray producers as inept or unwilling to manage well.

4.2.6 Producers do try to plan and operate sustainably
- Producers do try to operate sustainably within their own farming practices. They understand the need to conserve and manage their resources.

- Long-term sustainability is a goal for many producers. The desire to retain the property and keep it going for subsequent generations remains very strong. They have achieved considerable success although there remains much to be achieved. They need culturally appropriate support and encouragement to farm sustainably.

4.2.7 Producers do have an environmental consciousness
- Within the constraints of their own industry, beef producers and sheep/wheat producers manage their environmental resources through an integration of precedence and personal experiences with appropriate technological supports.
• Producers are acutely aware of their responsibilities to their land and to successive generations.
• Where short-term goals of ‘saying in’ agriculture become prominent, there is sometimes, however, a tendency to neglect conservation options/measures.

4.2.8 Producers do undertake ‘whole-farm’ strategic planning
• Producers rise to the challenge drought conditions place on them through the development of personal production strategies and alternative approaches to land and water usage. These ‘local knowledges’ need to be more widely disseminated and understood.
• Education qualifications are not highly correlated with the ability to remain on the property during drought.
• There is a correlation between educational qualifications and the capacity for producers to obtain off-farm employment.

4.2.9 Their communities should not be taken for granted
• Drought and restructuring are depleting community resources in a spiral of decline as people leave, services are reduced and more people leave.
• Policies tend to assume community relations to provide an infinite resource for support in difficult times and means of communicating skills and knowledge needed for the improvement of management. Some policies actively threaten community relations.

4.2.10 Drought policy has unintended consequences
• Drought policy decisions are cumulative with other policy decisions and do have unintended consequences. Policies and the ways in which they are implemented have impacts on families and communities which affect social relationships in ways which are unintended and not predicted.
• Threats to family and community cohesion are apparent consequences of drought policy changes and their implementation.

4.2.11 ‘Experts’ can cause additional stress
• The producer’s view of a policy maker is that of a person who enters the producer’s community from what is effectively a foreign culture. Listening is not just a matter of being present and hearing people talk. It involves reaching an understanding based on a mutual appreciation of the two cultures free from the assumptions and interpretations implicit in policy.
• Agronomists and extension officers do need to understand the full impact of drought conditions. While being well aware of effects on farm production, extension staff with only agricultural training may not be sensitive to all factors relating to family and community relations which can affect farm management and hence production.
4.2.12 **Human service responses require better integration**
- Counselling services have been welcomed by many farm families, nevertheless there still is a lot of work that needs to be done to incorporate human service responses within the cultural and social fabric of rural Australia.

- Such responses need to be designed and implemented to build community, not to create dichotomies and stresses within communities.

- Women rather than men are more likely to take up counselling support. The changing roles of women within the family needs to be well understood by agencies offering support and advice.

4.2.13 **Producers express cynicism about the media**
- There is as much danger is uncritically accepting mythology of producers as ruthless exploiters who live off subsidies as there is in uncritically accepting mythology of producers as helpless victims.

- Many producers are cynical about the media’s offers of ‘assistance’.

4.2.14 **Rural Australia does feel isolated from, and abandoned by, urban Australia**
- Recognition of the struggle that rural Australia is undertaking needs to be better integrated within rural policy, human service policy and education policy.

- The potential for the long term effects of the drought for social dislocation in rural Australia needs to be better understood at all levels of government.

4.2.15 **Further sociological research is urgently required**
- To follow up this study with one which examines the predicament of producers after three years (who has stayed on their property/who has left etc)

- To establish how drought might be managed on a catchment-by-catchment basis.

- To undertake, on a case study basis, a study of the complex relationship between farming ideology, production decisions and environmental security.
Changing Spaces/Places: A Review of Literature

5.1 Introduction

In past decades sociologists have tended not to enter discussions about the meaning and impacts of natural events such as droughts, floods and fires in Australia. There might be a number of reasons for this - we would suggest at least three. First, many of the above events directly impact upon rural regions rather than the cities. There have been very few city-based social researchers keen to investigate rural social issues. Second, rural issues are not necessarily the focus of research for regionally-based social researchers. Third, there has been little economic incentive to study such issues. It is only in the past decade that bodies such as the Rural Industries R&D, and the Land and Water R&D corporations have begun funding research into the social aspects of agriculture. As a result, with minimal professional and financial encouragement to study the changing structure of agriculture, natural resources management, farmer behaviour, and related topics, researchers have tended to avoid these areas.

Previous research approaches to drought are based on the collection and analysis of secondary data (newspaper reports and so forth) to provide an understanding of the ‘meaning’ of drought. There has been little empirical evidence to date to support alternative understandings. Our study has been deliberately designed to assess the lived experience of drought according to producers whose properties are in drought declared (or formerly drought declared) areas. As discussed earlier, the overall aim of the research was to explore producer-based understandings of the meaning of drought, its impact upon their lives, how they cope, what strategies they adopt, and what resource use (and other) implications arise from the actions they take during drought. It has also attempted to assess their views on drought policy and on resource management options. There are some obvious advantages with this approach - it avoids many of the functionalist (over)generalisations and totalising notions about the social order; it seeks to identify ‘interests’ and how groups with different interests can mobilise to articulate competing themes and claims; it is based upon the view - and largely undermines counter claims - that drought is some objective reality readily understood and appreciated by all; and it shows the strategic political advantage of producers who can present themselves as ‘victims’ and who, through the evocation of deeply entrenched myths about the bush, can elicit assistance in a way other groups would find extremely difficult.

This chapter draws together the literature from the wider context in which such lived experiences are understood within a social construction model. We begin with a brief overview of the impact of a globalised and corporatised agricultural industry in Australia. We then identify five social outcomes of this impact on local communities and local farming practices. We conclude with a summary of the ‘consequences’ of a

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globalised rural Australia, and the way in which such consequences need to be incorporated into future research and policy formulation.

5.2 Globalisation and agrarian change

According to McMichael (1996) it is fruitful to consider change as being part of a ‘globalisation project’. Globalisation is viewed as a process of development driven by a strategy of market liberalisation, by a declining nation state and, of increasing importance, ‘global governance’ in the form of institutions such as the World Trade Organisation. The globalisation project has its basis in transnational economic power relations - with market power wielded by TNCs and financial power in the hands of transnational banks. This leads to:

... subordination of former Second and Third World states to these global institutional forces...and...of the First World states to these...forces - a subordination as yet by no means as severe as in the former two Worlds, in part because First World societies have more institutional and political coherence, so a smaller proportion of their population is marginalised (McMichael, 1996:177).

Unlike the former “development” project which was based upon social integration via integrated economic development within nation states, the “globalisation” project identifies particular regions in different nations to perform tasks integrated at the level of the firm. Transnational (corporate firm) integration is achieved at the expense of national (economic and political) integration (McMichael, 1996). In an earlier work McMichael (1994) attempts to map a strategy for understanding the connections between local and global processes. He indicates the desirability of understanding change in specific commodities as one of the bases for new research:

The reformulation of the commodity...responds to the new segmented world market in a recomposition of the politicotechnical relations of production. In sum, a new global commodity requires a globally competitive labor force ... Methodologically, global restructuring is represented in the strategy of division and recombination of an uneven labor force in order to compete in a reconstituted world market. That is, it is a local (agro-industrial) response, and contribution, to changing global conditions (McMichael, 1994: 279).

Such local responses might also include changes to agriculture as ‘green’ issues impact upon food quality and the environment, the emergence of new social movements, and the geopolitics of changes in food demand and supply.

Buttel (1996) criticises a number of existing accounts of agri-food restructuring for having been unable to link processes at the global level to those at the farm (and regional) level. His criticism is based on two main points. First, that whereas the globalists tend to assume that what is occurring in wider industry (so-called post-Fordist tendencies such as niche marketing, flexible specialisation and so on) will somehow automatically be mirrored in agriculture, he suggests that this may not at all be the case. He reminds us that many theorists from the ‘new’ rural sociology school have been able convincingly to argue for agriculture’s ‘particularities’ - those biological and other features of farm production which have acted (and are likely to continue to act) to prevent any total incorporation of farming into the wider industrial economy. Second, that the two streams of thought about agrarian change - the ‘globalist’ account which tends to ignore cultural aspects of change, and the ‘localist’
approach which tends to ignore structure - are individually incapable of providing the necessary integration of the insights from both areas.

For Buttel the best means of understanding the emerging ‘relocalisation’ in the context of global forces, is to study the diversity of farm practices. Accordingly:

... the structures and practices of agriculture are critical not only because these are important in rural livelihood configurations and rural economies. They are also the most important factor(s) shaping the environmental effects of agri-food systems... The institutional and technical arrangements of farming are more complex than is normally acknowledged in most of the globalisation literature. The relocation perspective ... reminds us of the crucial roles that local knowledges, the complexities of coordination of farming tasks, and gender and household dynamics play in farming systems and rural societies in general (Buttel, 1996:33).

5.3 Globalisation and corporatised agriculture

European-derived agriculture in Australia has always had a global focus - with most of what has been produced leaving Australia’s shores as raw, unprocessed, primary products such as wool, sugar, beef and wheat. Up until the mid 1970s such production and distribution occurred under a mantle of protection, subsidisation and state regulation - something which has largely disappeared in recent decades. Rural communities were, to a limited extent, ‘planned’ communities, with Federal and State governments providing infrastructural support for railways, roads, schools, law courts, police stations and other facilities and services. Such state involvement was consistent with ideologies of decentralisation, state-assisted economic growth (expansionism) and egalitarianism (social equity). Commitment to such ideals has now been replaced with a more narrow focus on free markets, ‘user pays’ and ‘self help’ - as part of what we might term ‘neo-liberalism’.

For most Australian neo-liberal economists, the move to a more globalised world in which freer trade prevails is viewed as essential if Australian agriculture is to prosper. It is currently seen not to prosper because of a combination of the specific nature of traded agricultural commodities, low commodity prices, unfair world competition, and the way assets are ‘fixed’ in farming (see Malcolm, et al., 1996) for a discussion of this issue). A severe and continuing drought has been an additional factor over the past decade (Stehlik, et al., 1996a). The textbook approach to understanding the ‘farm problem’ focuses on the inevitable ‘pressure’ that continued economic growth - viewed as essential for Australia’s well-being - puts on the farm sector:

The essence of the ‘farm problem’...is that economic growth causes net incomes in agriculture to increase less than those in the non-agricultural sector. The problem arises partly because of the nature of the demand farmers face for their output. Demand for agricultural products does not respond a great deal to falls in prices, nor to rises in consumer’s incomes. As an economy grows and national income increases, there is a decline in the proportion of extra income spent on food. Inevitably then, the share of national income going to agriculture declines relative to the share going to the rest of the economy. In addition, the supply of agricultural commodities increases more rapidly than the demand because of technological change. The result of supply outstripping demand is that prices fall and farmers have to increase output to maintain income, which they do by adopting new technology, and the cycle goes on (Malcolm, et al., 1996: 57).
Furthermore, many farmers can not be ‘enticed’ from farming because of a combination of lifestyle considerations and their inability to obtain fulfilling and well-remunerated full time off-farm employment (the main reason for which is declining work options in rural regions - not only for the poorly educated, but increasingly for the better educated). The best they can do is to produce more output per input of labour - largely by utilising new technology - and/or by increasing the scale of their operations.

The...economic forces that farmers confront add up to the conclusion that, with economic growth in the community in general, there will eventually either have to be fewer farmers...or poorer farmers. The third option is for farmers to be subsidised by taxpayers and consumers. This option has been widely adopted in the USA and Western Europe (Malcolm, et al., 1996: 58).

For most of Australia’s neo-liberal economists only the first two scenarios are to be countenanced: the third is anathema because it involves state intervention, considered to be a market distortion (see Gow, 1994; 1996). This is despite the facts that: the intensification of agriculture as well as persistent low income in agriculture has been implicated in continued environmental degradation in Australia (see Conacher and Conacher, 1995; Vanclay and Lawrence, 1995); that stress levels and general social malaise are a feature of contemporary farming (Gray et al., 1993); and, that there is only faint hope of persuading competing nations to remove all forms of subsidisation from farming and of moving to a so-called ‘level playing field’. Instead, the main instrument of state ‘intervention’ - the Rural Adjustment Scheme 4, which operated from 1988 to 1997, provided grants for the least efficient to leave agriculture, and helped many of the marginally efficient remaining to increase the scale and efficiency of production via farm build-up loans. At the industry level, greater emphasis has been given to the removal of any market distortions which might prevent ‘adjustment’ from occurring in line with overseas price regimes.

For neo-liberals, social arrangements are seen to flow logically and advantageously from the market. It is inefficient to prop up producers who are not economically viable, nor is it desirable to seek to ‘save’ country towns whose economies are in decline. While there are some differences in the ways State and Federal governments react to this, they generally accept that changes are in line with economic realities. If market forces dictate that towns or regions must shrink, then so be it - that is the ‘natural’ outcome which will move resources into more appropriate endeavours. In some functional way, ‘failures are part of a steering mechanism that directs an economy toward prosperity.’ (Gow, 1994:11). It will be the efforts of entrepreneurial local people, discovering for themselves new opportunities, which will create growth.

The argument above is, in modified form, that which currently holds sway in Australia. It is one which overlooks a number of factors: that the ‘free market’ is a myth (and that for most nations economic decisions which influence industry are greatly tempered by political and social considerations); that the attempts of governments further to expose Australia’s industries to international competition is - in a world of continuing protection abroad - disadvantaging, rather than enhancing prospects for growth of, those industries; that the ‘level playing field’ is a ‘lie’

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4 One of the spin-offs from this research has been an increased interest in rural policies. One student undertaking doctoral research currently at CQU is focussing on the Rural Adjustment Scheme.
promulgated to justify industry restructuring, but which results in de-industrialisation; and that economic ‘signals’ are only one set of signals which producers will take into consideration when making decisions about location and resource use (see Rees et al., 1993; Stewart, 1994).

5.4 Local social effects

Global economic forces - in concert with domestic neo-liberalist policies - appear to be, at least in part, responsible for the following five social outcomes all of which should be viewed as providing the context for this study:

5.4.1 Exacerbation of the trend toward long term population decline in inland areas: In the ten years from 1985-86 to 1994-95, one in every 12 rural properties had disappeared (most were amalgamated with another, or other, properties in an effort to increase viability). In 1994-95 Australia had 115,368 viable rural properties - defined as those producing $20k worth of on-farm produce in that year (see The Australian, 25 June, 1997:3). Among commodity groups, the dairy industry experienced the greatest decline in numbers (3,100 farms lost at an average annual rate of 2.2 percent). This was followed by wheat and other ‘broadacre’ cropping properties (numbers of farms dropping from 82,430 to 70,883 or by 1.7 percent per annum) (The Australian, 25 June 1997:3). The decline was greatest in the coastal strip in NSW (where farmlands were being resumed for housing development) and areas of inland Australia (where farm viability - continued low prices and drought - caused numbers to decline).

Some years before the recent figures emerged it had been that:

Areas of declining population were mainly in provincial, rural or remote areas. Reasons for decline included unemployment, the rural recession, contraction of government services and a drift of families and young people to capital cities for secondary school or tertiary education...With the loss of young people, many country regions...suffered...problems associated with an ageing population profile and the need for more services for elderly people reported (Kelty, 1993: 15-16).

The rationalisation of private services is yet another factor in the downward spiral. With governments withdrawing services, and with many branch firms closing, people are migrating from country towns. Those moving are those most likely to find work elsewhere, leaving already-disadvantaged groups such as the aged to cope with the declining services (see Stehlik and Lawrence, 1996). Data from the 1996 Census indicate that of the rural shires which show growth above the national average all border on the sea. The previously well-defined trend for inland Australians to move toward the coast (mainly to regional cities close to metropolitan centres) is confirmed in the latest Census.

Of the regions with the greatest fall in population, all were rural and most were inland (see The Australian, 16 July 1997:8). Some inland mining towns provided income per head of population figure equal to or above those in the wealthy suburbs of Melbourne or Sydney but, more typically, income levels of rural dwellers do not compare well with those in the cities. According to Fitzgerald (1996: 42) rural life is generally characterised by ‘poorly performing local economies...; declining
employment opportunities; low and often inadequate household incomes; out-migration of youth; negative health outcomes associated with stress and low incomes;...and reduced access to services resulting from rationalisation....’. It has also been reported (see also Stehlik et al., 1996b) that the quality of life of rural people is deteriorating. This is in the face of other evidence that mining or other ‘special purpose’ communities are experiencing growth, making it difficult to draw definitive conclusions about the degree to which some homogenised ‘rural decline’ is realistic or generalisable.

5.4.2 Decline in social capital in rural regions: People’s ability to work together to develop community structures is crucial for social and economic progress. Social interaction, developed through trust, and often occurring in a spontaneous and/or voluntary manner, is seen by some (see Cox, 1995; Gain, 1996) to be a major component in the success of both individual and community. If collective social capital is the basis of a democratic community (see Cox, 1995) its diminution might be viewed as threatening or at least undermining democracy.

There has been a strong cultural tradition in rural society based on maintenance of family-farm relations and viable local businesses. The degree to which voluntary community associations have been a fundamental plank of economic and social life in rural communities has been well described by Wild (1983), Poiner (1990) and Gray (1991). As farm-family members increase the extent of their off-farm work, as their incomes from agricultural production fall, as rural dwellers lose jobs, and as those with more opportunity for geographical mobility leave, the ability of rural communities to take collective action is lessened (see for example, Stehlik et al., 1996b). Social capital is believed, in such circumstances, to have deteriorated, severely limiting the ability of communities to do the very things expected of them by neo-liberalism - that is, to be resourceful, ‘self-reliant’, and to provide the intellectual wherewithall to catalyse their own future growth.

Once, it was thought that the ‘inevitable’ processes of farm amalgamation and community decline would not effect in a negative way the larger regional centres (Beer et al., 1994). These centres were, after all, sheltered because they provided education and other services for the region. But, with the decline in government service industry workers the belief that growth in the regional capitals will still occur has been questioned. The point here is this: neo-liberalist ideologies and policies are both justifying, and leading to, the demise of social capital in certain sections of inland (rural) Australia at the very time those ideologies and practices demand responses which require that social capital be maintained and enhanced. Rural regions, unable to provide the necessary leadership or economic enterprise might then be labelled as ‘backward’, not because of any intrinsic backwardness, but because the state has seen fit to remove some of the very people whose social capital might have contributed to regional economic growth. According to Gray et al.,(1997), if rural communities are to be expected to gather sufficient collective resources to deal effectively with global processes, their social capital must be developed to a level sufficient for social action. Yet, government policies which promote competition - and allow/encourage involvement of national or international firms in local decision making - threaten conditions of cooperation at the local level. Similarly, bureaucratic stringencies which are imposed on regional areas create divisions in local
communities (see Gray, et al., 1996). Both lead to a weakening, rather than a strengthening, of community social resources.

That many rural communities are ‘going backward’ in economic and social terms indicates the need, according to some policy analysts (see Fitzgerald, 1996; Gain, 1996), for the state to develop and implement ‘interventionist’ policies which will build the capacity of communities to formulate plans for integrated development.

5.4.3 The de-traditionalisation of rural society: Whether one considers the decline in rural tradition to be a major concern, or a great blessing, is not the point. What is occurring is that global processes are undermining older, more stable, forms of social interaction, calling into question the bases for future collective action. De-traditionalisation can be best understood as the dis-embedding of patterns of communal authority and customary practices by the intensification of, in particular, consumer culture - itself a product of globalising tendencies (see Heelas, 1996; Morris, 1996). For Giddens (1994:42), such globalising influences have been

... directly bound up with far-reaching changes happening in the tissue of social life. They have helped set in play pervasive processes of detraditionalization (which) in turn means an acceleration of the reflexivity of lay populations.

In a world of intensified social reflexivity, Giddens suggests ‘Keynesianism...could not survive’ as it presumed ‘a citizenry with more stable lifestyle habits than are characteristic of a globalized universe of high reflexivity’ (1994: 42). Globalisation ‘manufactures uncertainties’, and the New Right has grasped the opportunity of linking further progress to deregulation. When pursued in a policy sense, deregulation is but another factor contributing to de-traditionalisation (1994:43).

In the mid 1980s - and following the impact of a ‘rural crisis’ in Australia - it was clear that farming and rural people were greatly confused (and annoyed) at what many perceived to be the inability of the state to restore a stable ‘regime’ of profit for rural/regional Australia (see Lawrence, 1987). Some were rejecting New Right-style policies, but did not have the capacity to organise meaningful resistance.

Work undertaken by Gray et al.,(1993) in four regions of rural Australia provides evidence of the extent of farmer confusion and dissatisfaction with the state’s role in agricultural policy and their uncertainty about the future. The social structures of farming - the roles and relationships which had been created and maintained within the system of family farming and which provided it with stability - were being threatened by wider social and economic forces, as well as by the responses of farmers to those forces, specifically, the taking of off-farm work. Off-farm work helped to keep the producers on the land, but also altered the capacity of people to engage in voluntary associations, increased stress in marital relations, and altered the social status of producers. Further, it placed new (and unfamiliar) demands on family members (undermined ‘conventional’ and familiar roles of farming couples) and, for some, lead to a run down in farm capital and to environmental deterioration. These produced, in turn, anxiety about the future of the farm as a viable economic entity (see Gray et al., 1993: 73-77). Later work by Gray et al., (1995) confirmed the extent to which external pressures produced conflicting requirements in family farm reproduction, undermining the cooperation which had, hitherto, been the foundation for action at the community level.
5.4.4 Acceptance of an ideology of ‘self help’ in regions undergoing restructuring: As successive State and Federal Governments have reduced expenditures by cutting services and curtailing infrastructural expenditure in regional Australia, there have been vocal - but not well coordinated - efforts to politicise the impacts on regional communities. Given that voting patterns still suggest that regional Australia is important in helping to decide which party will win an election - and in an effort to minimise regional disaffection - governments have set up various ‘task forces’ to seek to understand the regional problem and its possible solution. The Kelty Report, commissioned by the former Federal Labor Government, examined the problems of the regions. Kelty and his co-authors concluded that public and private investment was the key to regional growth, and recommended a 30 year infrastructure investment strategy which would target virtually all of the main areas of activity/employment in regional Australia (for example, transport, communications, agriculture, culture and welfare, energy)(see Kelty, 1993).

The Kelty Report also suggested that a necessary part of such a policy would be measures which ‘empowered’ the regions. While this had a certain appeal - it appeared to give local people an opportunity to develop plans for their own destiny - there was very little said about exactly who would be empowered, by whom, in what way, and to what extent. As Guille (1994:26) noted at the time, the notion that regions should control their own destinies ‘can become an excuse for inaction by central governments’. An organisational structure for the coordination of regional activities - the Regional Economic Development Organisations (or REDOs) - was proposed, and some developed throughout the nation.

In the summary of the conference on rural social policy in 1996 (see Council of Social Services of NSW, 1996: 6) it was argued that the success of regional strategies depended upon the mobilisation of a ‘wide range of members of local and regional communities...(and) empower(ing) individuals and groups in leading their communities forward’. The model here was, though, still of the interventionist kind - promoting an integrated regional development policy which included state provision of basic infrastructure and special assistance to disadvantaged regions.

The Coalition has set in motion policies which withdraw state-funded economic activity from the regions. The REDO program, for example, has been abandoned, but what is being retained is the ideology of self help. Now, it becomes essential that communities develop their own plans so as to become, as it were, ‘business ready’. Thus, what governments could/should do is to provide those communities with ‘the tools’ for competitive advantage - with little said about the infrastructure which might be required. At the same conference on rural Australia, authors began building upon the new self help ethos emerging. Lawler (1997) highlighted schemes among Aboriginal groups in NSW, Roberts (1997) spoke about ‘community based regional development’ in the Riverina region of NSW and Watkins (1997:92) argued that revitalisation ‘requires vision, strategy, leadership, partnership, and action, driven at the local level and utilising the breadth of community resources’. Noteworthy - given the extent to which rural women have been expected to carry the burden of structural change in rural communities - was the degree to which initiatives taken by women’s groups would be crucial to the success of rural Australia (see Broad, 1997; Campbell, 1997; Fisher, 1997). Women will, in other words, be working even harder to make up
the ground lost as agencies involved in planning, welfare and social security reduce their impact in rural Australia.

One of the most important initiatives in promoting ‘self help’ has been that of Landcare. Here, community members join forces to develop local responses to environmental degradation. It has been viewed by some (see Campbell, 1992) as a largely non bureaucratic approach to land management where people take control. It epitomises the new approach to the state’s attempt to address the problems which have occurred over generations by overgrazing and overcropping (land and water mismanagement). According to Lockie the intent of the National Landcare Program is

... surprisingly consistent with the economic rationalist doctrine that has dominated government over the last two decades...The neo-liberal political philosophy underpinning economic rationalism promotes small government, minimal regulation, and...market solutions to social and environmental problems (1997:232).

At this time it appears that Australia - and particularly its rural areas - have not seen a surge of economic activity so much desired by the state and predicted by those neo-classical economists wedded to notions of comparative advantage. Instead, the Coalition government is blaming existing ‘inefficiencies’ in production as a deterrent for capital, and has highlighted the need for labour market reform as key elements in securing the interests of the corporations. At the time of writing, the Coalition is proposing that many areas in or around the State capitals should become Free Trade Zones. If this were to occur, it would be likely that they mirror what has happened overseas: they will be areas free from trade union influence, where minimum wages prevail, where work is of a production- or assembly-line (low skilled) type, where the state’s infrastructure is provided on a subsidised basis, and where the TNCs can trade freely with their own affiliates without incurring trade penalties (see, for elaboration, Crouch and Wheelwright, 1982).

5.5 Some consequences of a globalised rural Australia

The rural social consequences of the ‘globalisation’ of Australian agriculture and rural society have not been hard to describe, and include:

- exacerbation of the trend toward long term population loss in many of Australia’s inland rural areas combined, increasingly, with the development for post modern services and activities (recreation, leisure, retirement) in the more climatically favourable and coastal rural regions

- decline of social capital in rural regions, leading to a situation in which many country towns and rural areas do not appear to have the same political or economic ‘clout’ which they had in earlier times

- the de-traditionalisation of rural society - leading to uncertainties about change and direction, and to the demise of some social (sporting, club and other) institutions

- the growing acceptance of an ideology of ‘self help’ in regions undergoing restructuring (and, associated with this, an implicit acceptance of responsibility if the local community is not able to compete successfully on economic terms), and
• the scapegoating of racial and ethnic minorities who are blamed for the economic problems of the nation.

It should also be acknowledged, however, that there are some positive sides to these tendencies. For example, the de-traditionalisation of rural society facilitated through, for example, the introduction of new satellite, computer and other technologies has the potential to bring rural society closer to metropolitan Australia in terms of tastes, values and social and economic expectations. At the same time as local culture and power structures might wane, new opportunities exist - at least for those who can afford the new technologies - for the growth of cooperation through links with wider culture. The ideology of ‘self help’ and the associated realisation that the state is unwilling/unable to act to assist rural towns might provide the impetus for regional/global connections - the very links which some writers (see Lash and Urry, 1994; Featherstone et al., 1995) have suggested are crucial for future development within nation states. Finally, a number of post modern developments have the potential to assist rural-based populations. These developments include: the growth of tourism (especially cultural and eco-tourism); the capturing of (overseas) niche markets for primary products; evidence that consumers at home and abroad have an increasing demand for fresh, ‘clean and green’ foods; and, the re-definition of rural space as a place of consumption.

5.6 Agrarianism and lived experience

By returning to, and integrating into agrarian political economy, the specificities of local level concerns (via social constructionist approaches which provide new insights into production and consumption relations) it may be possible to overcome the shortcomings of the ‘globalist’ and ‘localist’ perspectives. While Buttel (1996) contends that such an insertion might best be achieved by the utilising the insights of the Wageningen school, there are several problems associated with notions of ‘farming styles’ and ‘subcultures of farming’ (see Vanclay and Lawrence, 1995) several of which are mentioned by Buttel (1996). These include the study of ‘diversity’ for its own sake, rather than as a basis for social explanation; the reification of ‘subculture’; the overemphasis on local action as a foil for wider forces of incorporation; its utopianism; and the functionalist assumptions which are part of any attempt to view society as a combination of various ‘subcultures’ (even where this assumes a plurality of norms and values) (see Buttel, 1994; Vanclay and Lawrence, 1995; Buttel, 1996; Phillips, 1996).

Gray (1996) has entered the debate by imploring rural social researchers to return to some of the central concepts in sociology, one of which is local identity - something which can be captured by understanding ‘individual action and belief’. The work of Phillips (1996) is, in this regard, an example of the application of such an approach. Phillips employs an ethnographic method to understand cultural constructions of ‘good farming’ and in doing so seeks to explore farming culture as something which mediates individual responses to global processes. Using the insights of French sociologist Bourdieu, Phillips (1996) identifies the social fields in which farmers ‘struggle for position and legitimate authority’. She concludes that in identifying what is ‘good’ - the farming way of life, local rural community values and structures - farmers are able to resist (or at least reinterpret for their own advantage) the dominant
discourse of ‘farming as a business’ - even where this is having a generalising (or homogenising) effect on farm practices.

In sum, the need for structuralist accounts of rural social change to incorporate (without overdetermining) locality-based accounts raises a number of theoretical and methodological issues which are only now being addressed. It is essential to establish what structures and processes are acting in what ways and at what levels, what sorts of cultural predispositions are exhibited at the ‘local’ and broader levels, how local culture acts to challenge and/or mediate the forces of global incorporation, and how, as an outcome of all these things, local identity, farming culture and farming practice are, at one and the same time, both altered and preserved.
Findings: From ‘natural disaster’ to ‘managed risk policies’

I think this drought is different to what normal droughts have been because we have had a lead up to it - a sort of creeping action where we have had depressed wet seasons all the way through for 10 years, and the country was gradually getting to the stage where it couldn’t cope with the normal dry. But then it has become a major drought and something that has sort of crept up on you (Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

Just because it rains it is not going to rain money. People aren’t going to say, well, we are right now and we can see the rebuilding. It is a combination of a lot of things over a long period of time (Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

6.1 Strategic Shifts – Determining Drought Policy:

The drought of the 1990s has resulted in a major policy shift in the way in which ‘drought’ is considered within Australian government policy terms. There have been some strategic shifts in drought policy over the past 15 years which can be summarised as follows:

- To preparedness assistance
- To risk management policy
- To generally –available measures
- To farmer responsibility
- To risk management incentives
- To drought contingency planning

A history of drought policy has identified a shift from a response to an aftermath of a natural disaster to the prediction of an event that is naturally part of a variable climate. The underpinning of drought policy has also moved from the previous acceptance of unmanageable circumstances to a present manageable mode. The advent of drought prompts government intervention that is based on formulating policy to assist producers during (and often) after a drought.

Historically, such policies have been in response to drought having 'natural disaster' properties and such interventions have mainly taken the form of administration of financial assistance. A major review of the drought policy was undertaken by the Federal Labor government in 1989 and resulted in a shift in ‘understanding’ and therefore ‘managing’ drought. The recommendations of the Drought Policy Review Task Force established in 1989, were based on a philosophy of self reliance and better farming practices. Drought was no longer considered a natural untamed event but part of a normal variable climate that could be planned for and managed. As a consequence, drought policies from 1990 at the Federal and State levels were
formulated on this premise. The responses to this shift in drought policy by academics and other stakeholders have tended only to be analysed within agricultural and economic frameworks (see Freebairn 1983; White et al., 1993; and Simmons 1993). Gow (1997) and Williams (1997) both characterise the ‘policy reversal’ of the late 1980s as being a manifestation of the underlying policies of economic rationalism.

6.2 Historical contexts - drought as ‘natural’ disaster

The establishment of a Drought Policy Review Task Force at the Federal Government marked a major watershed in the political construction of drought. Prior to 1989, all levels of government had always considered drought to be a natural disaster, something which could not be planned for. This perception of drought as disaster in nature, such as fire or flood, meant that both government and farmers believed that the public cost of such disasters should be borne by the government as representing the wider public. In other words, public monies could and should be used to support those producers whose livelihoods were affected by droughts. State governments provided assistance for drought-stricken farmers in the form of loans, subsidies and financial help (White et al., 1993: 219) and in 1969 the Federal Government introduced the Drought Bond Scheme which

... [has] ... been designed ... to encourage certain classes of primary producer to accumulate financial reserves in good seasons which can be drawn upon in the event of drought, fire or flood (cited in Hefford, 1985:115).

This scheme clearly designated drought alongside other ‘natural’ disasters such as fire and flood. It was also linked to tax concessions for farmers that the Coombs Committee in 1973 considered to be only legitimate assistance if there were ‘abnormally adverse seasonal conditions’ (cited in Hefford, 1985:120). The Drought Bond Scheme was then replaced in 1976 by the Income Equalization Deposits Scheme which had the similar principles of accumulation in a good year and a ‘self-help approach’ (Hefford, 1985: 357).

As droughts were considered to be natural disasters, financial help for drought afflicted farmers thus came under the Natural Disaster Relief Arrangements (NDRA). This was the Commonwealth's major umbrella for funding drought assistance that provided the States with funds for 30 years (White et al., 1993:219). The measures provided by this scheme included:

- concessional loans for carry-on and restocking purposes
- freight concessions
- subsidies to local and semi-government authorities for the slaughter and disposal of surplus stock (Industries Assistance Commission, 1983:1).

However it was activated only after the states had expended a specific amount on drought relief (White et al., 1993:219). A major criticism of the NDRA was that it fostered an operating environment for farmers ‘in which assistance was expected, and
farm operations were planned on the basis that governments would provide a 'safety net' against climate variability' (White et al. 1993:219). Other concerns were:

- abuse of fodder and freight subsidies was evident
- these subsidies favoured larger livestock properties and the benefits were largely captured by supplies through higher prices
- input-based subsidies provided poorly targeted assistance for both recipients and their needs
- subsidies served to distort the relative costs and return of alternative practices
- farmers were encouraged to retain higher than desirable stocking rates as drought developed, leading to additional land degradation (summarised from White et al., 1993:219).

6.3 Challenging drought as ‘natural’

In the early 1980s, concurrent with a serious drought, these policies began to be challenged. Special drought assistance measures were introduced in August 1982 that provided for subsidies on fodder purchases and interest payments. Freebairn (1983) particularly identified the ‘serious flaws’ in these transaction-based policies. As Williams (1997) summarises:

They discouraged ... the conservation of fodder, the use of conservative stocking rates and the building up of financial reserves because these strategies, although recognised as sound risk management practices, received no subsidy (1997:5).

In 1983, the Industries Assistance Commission (IAC) published a report on the Rural Adjustment Scheme (RAS), and on its adequacy to ‘meet the immediate adjustments needs of the rural industries resulting from the present drought’ (IAC, 1983:1). This inquiry which formed the basis for the report on RAS, established that

... the farming community did not appear interested to establish the need for any significant additions to the existing measures for drought assistance. However, the majority of witnesses who commented on the various credit assistance measures suggested that this form of assistance would best be handled through the RAS. Comments on drought subsidies (freight, fodder, and interest) were mainly directed at the discriminatory nature of this assistance in favour of sheep and cattle industries. Witnesses representing banks suggest that, as in and following past droughts, commercial financial institutions would accommodate most credit requirements of drought affected farmers (IAC, 1983:2).

The Commission commented that the existing subsidies were discriminatory against farmers who prepared for drought and may deter others from making adequate ‘physical and financial provision for future drought’ (1983:13). In its second report (1984), the Commission recommended that RAS be discontinued rather than be made the centrepiece of drought assistance. This recommendation was not enacted by the Federal Government, however, the IAC report's criticisms of the drought relief
scheme led to a major inquiry, begun in 1989 and based on the 1983 RAS Report critique that current assistance measures resulted in better farmers being discriminated against.

Other changes in policy during the period 1983-88 concerned resource conservation, particularly soil conservation and welfare issues in rural areas (Martin, 1989: 7). Policy directions that were put in place through the Rural Adjustment Scheme, during this period, were mainly aimed at fostering adjustment to economic change, including offering packages to those who could no longer survive on the land to encourage them to leave. In 1988, funding went beyond the regular practice of land acquisition and included a commitment to improve farmers’ skills and ‘the adoption of improved technology’ (Martin, 1989: 7).

6.4 ‘Managing’ drought - towards self reliance

The Drought Policy Review Task Force formed by the Hawke Labor Government in 1989, made recommendations which were based on a philosophy of self reliance and better farming practice ones which referred to understanding the drought rather than defining it. In general, the Task Force report made recommendations on the following issues:

- natural disaster relief arrangements
- national drought policy
- government responsibilities
- policies and programs to manage for drought including taxation, income smoothing and financial, land and resource management.
- advisory services and research
- financial assistance measures
- rural adjustment schemes
- non farm rural business
- institutional arrangements

Central to this shift in public policy was a changed understanding as to the ‘nature’ of drought - that it was no longer a natural, untameable event, but rather something ‘normal’ within climatic conditions that could be planned for and managed. This principle has now become central to ongoing policy making. For example, the Land Management Task Force (1995:31) determined that drought was to be seen as a ‘normal feature of the Australian climate and, hence, of agriculture’. In 1989 the Drought Policy Review Task Force (DPRTF) was established with the aim ‘to assist the Commonwealth Government in formulating a comprehensive, national policy that provides more equitable, efficient and environmentally responsible approaches for dealing with the effects of drought’ (DPRTF Report, 1990:1). To do so, the DPRTF reviewed traditional concepts of drought, concluding that

... drought is not a specific event, nor is it an absolute or physical condition that can be determined by the degree of rainfall variability. While drought may be triggered by long periods of rainfall deficiency, it represents a prolonged failure or inability of producers to respond to those deteriorating conditions. Extreme drought represents periods of extreme risk to agricultural industries and the rural communities. Drought is therefore a relative concept that reflects the
The fact that the current agricultural production is out of equilibrium with prevailing seasonal conditions. Managing for drought, then, is about managing for the risks involved in carrying out agricultural business in a variable climate (1990:7; our emphasis).

This redefinition of drought and the accompanying objective of the DPRTF highlight some of the new orientations such as a more 'environmentally responsible' way of dealing with droughts and the issue of equity based on a re-conceptualisation of the responsibilities of the farmer. However, their suggestion that drought is a 'relative concept' is ambiguous as it is unclear as to whom this concept is relative.

The prevailing criticism suggested that existing policy and funding structures only encouraged non-sustainable farming practices. In particular, a number of researchers within both Federal and State government departments had expressed concerns that the then current financial help under the natural disaster scheme (NDRA) only created an expectation of assistance as well as leading to an increase in stocking levels rather than a decrease. Land degradation and irresponsible farming practices were, these critics argued, a result of indecisive government policy. In 1989 the Queensland Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee inquiry into the administration of drought assistance for example, reported that the two most common views were:

... that drought assistance was simply a form of general assistance and that it was a management incentive scheme during dry conditions ... [and it] ... encouraged 'compensatory farming' where property owners lived off properties in above-average seasons and off government assistance in below-average seasons (cited in Daly, 1994: 94).

The Task Force Review accepted drought as 'natural' but not a 'disaster' and part of the everyday business of 'rural enterprise' (in Senate Standing Committee on Rural & Regional Affairs, 1992:1). Farming had therefore to be seen like any other business risk. As a result, farmers needed to be more self-reliant and incorporate risk management since 'the responsibility for responding to variable seasonal conditions must still remain with individual producers’ (DPRTF Report, 1990:9). Government funding, the Report argued, should only be available under exceptional circumstances and in a 'rural adjustment context' (DPRTF Report, 1990:9). As part of its new orientation to link the management of drought and any governmental assistance for sustainable farming practices, the Report was adamant that any relief funding should not come under the Natural Disaster Scheme but under the Rural Adjustment Scheme (RAS). This was designed to help farmers adjust to new economic conditions and to change their farming practices in line with sustainable farming practices.

Essentially, the Rural Adjustment Scheme can now be seen as have the purpose of re-educating farmers and making them more self-reliant, so that only those that were up to date in their farming practices and had 'viable' properties would remain in the business. It was clear that a self-reliant approach called ‘for a clear separation of those policies aimed at providing incentives to improve the operation of the market place from those aimed at providing government relief in times of hardship’ (DPRTF Report, 1990:9). According to Simmons (1993:446) this was a clear demarcation of a welfare responsibility and ‘efficiency elements’ in the type of assistance during drought.
6.5 Shifting policies in times of crisis

Central to the Review Report’s recommendations was the belief that any relief scheme should not be based on a definition of drought as a natural disaster. Thus just as the drought was peaking in parts of eastern Australia and producers were entering into their second season without average rainfall, the Report also rejected the notion that the principle role of the Commonwealth is to ‘top up’ state funding. Farm management under drought conditions was now viewed as a ‘challenge’ requiring the adoption of a whole farm systems approach incorporating the results or research aimed at ‘better climate forecasting, pasture and stock monitoring, and decision support systems to management stocking rates’ as well as the use of ‘financial buffers’ such as Income Equalisation Deposits and Farm Management Bonds (see Land Management Taskforce, 1995:31). The Report argued that drought should be treated like any other business risk, suggesting that farmers be more self-reliant and incorporate risk management practices. However one woman beef producer in Central Queensland suggested that there was a ‘financial drought’ even before there was a climatic drought.

The farmers’ superannuation used to be their property. ... The values of those properties not going up that was one thing, the other was capital gains tax which you had to pay (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

The consequence of this shift has been that droughts are now no longer only viewed as climatic events (see Daly, 1994; Partridge, 1994) but are more broadly seen as evidence of bad management practice. The aim here is clearly meant that the individual producer must anticipate that drought will occur as a normal event, and to plan for it. The Review Report subsequently argued that government support should only be available under exceptional circumstances and in the context of structural adjustment, or the process through which non-viable producers exit agriculture and those remaining are helped to become sustainable in the long term. Consequently, Federal Government funding was then provided under the Rural Adjustment Scheme rather than Natural Disaster provisions (see also Gray et al, 1996). There have been other historical criticisms of drought policy, in particular, drought declaration that was (and still is) linked with rural assistance schemes. Daly suggests that drought declaration has been difficult due to

... defining the beginning and extent of a drought ... [and consequently] ... any attempt to make assistance dependent on a declaration politicises the process. ...

On efficiency, equity, welfare and environmental grounds, drought assistance should be means and needs tested and, when required, made conditional on the adoption of responsible management practices (1994: 91-92).

Otherwise, as Daly points out, drought declarations become part of a political game rather than a scientific decision. Both he and Simmons (1993) argue that drought declarations involve complex relationships between farmers, the media, local and state government as well as business interests. The removal of drought declarations as part of the necessary process to release drought assistance, would actually stop people from expecting drought assistance every time a season was drier than expected (Daly 1994).

The effects of this policy were much broader, amounting in essence to a redefinition of the social position of the farmer within ideas of Australian national identity by
making farming just another industry which had to learn to cope with its own risks. The concept of self reliance became closely tied with environmental ideals, and drought support was only made available to farmers which could show long term sustainability. Arguments for rural support now had to move beyond an emotional plea to a rational, economic and environmentalist proposition.

The Report was accepted by the Labor Government in July 1992 and became the basis for a new Federal Drought Policy that encapsulated the new principles and philosophies identified and proposed by the Task Force. The new National Drought Policy which emerged as the result of this report in July 1992 supported:

- a self-reliant/individual risk management approach
- the Rural Adjustment Scheme (RAS) as the appropriate way of dealing with assistance to families suffering hardship associated with drought
- the need to provide drought preparedness training measures to help farmers adjust to the new self-reliance approach
- that transaction-based subsidies should be phased out and, in the interim, should be the subject of decisions and funding by individual States
- that severe or exceptional drought may occasionally require additional response, which should be considered in the context of the principles and objectives of the NDP; and
- that the Commonwealth will consider the introduction of tax measures (derived from Kingma et al, 1992)

As Simmons (1993) argues, this policy had two important effects.

First it helped to defuse some of the emotional content of political discussion opening the way for changes in emphasis in the broader policy debate. Second, it released the Commonwealth from some of its funding arrangements with the states which required matching of Commonwealth and State grants. This has increased Commonwealth flexibility in dealing with drought while removing some of the financial incentives that exist with joint funding arrangements for states to declare droughts (1993:446).

6.6 Drought policy and the Rural Adjustment Scheme

From 1992 the Rural Adjustment Scheme became the major vehicle for delivering Commonwealth drought assistance. Following the establishment of the National Drought Strategy the RAS legislation was amended in July 1992 to include exceptional circumstances provisions. The purpose of exceptional circumstances was to provide short-term targeted assistance for rare and severe events outside normal risk management strategies (Rural Adjustment Scheme Advisory Council, 1996: 25 our emphasis). According to the relevant legislation, the States Grants (Rural Adjustment) Amendment Act, an interest rate subsidy of up to 100 per cent on
commercial finance for purposes of debt restructuring, carry-on finance, restocking and productivity improvements was to be available during periods defined as drought exceptional circumstances. Such assistance was provided on a regional basis and had a sunset clause.

In September 1992 the Rural Adjustment Scheme was restructured following a Review by Synapse Consulting (1992). The 'new' Rural Adjustment Scheme came into effect on January 1 1993. Fundamental to these changes included the establishment of a Rural Adjustment Scheme Advisory Council (RASAC) 'to provide strategic oversight of the Scheme' and ensure that RAS fulfilled its objectives of fostering greater self-reliance and individual risk management (Burdon, 1996: 28). Importantly, RASAC was set up to provide advice to the Minister on the general operation of the Scheme from a national perspective. More specifically, the purpose of RASAC was to report to the Minister on issues relating to farm adjustment and drought.

Apart from drought exceptional circumstances there are also other measures the Commonwealth has implemented to ensure that drought is something that can be planned for and 'managed'. While many of these measures predate the NDP, they are nevertheless consistent with the general shift in rural policy towards self-reliance. Some of the more important initiatives include:

- Farm Management Bonds (FMBs) and Income Equalisation Deposits (IEDs);
- Regional adjustment initiatives to encourage the uptake of drought preparedness measures;
- The Training and Skills (TASK) project administered through DEETYA aimed towards encouraging skills training in drought exceptional circumstances areas and thereby preventing the 'loss' of farm skills (Rural Adjustment Scheme Advisory Council, 1996: 29).

6.7 Self-reliance as managed risk - where is it heading?

The farmer has moved from the 'the victim' to the unenviable position of 'the culprit', identified as the cause of the unnecessarily early onset of drought conditions ... drought has gone from being a right to a hard earned privilege (Williams, 1997: 4).

As the drought continued beyond the 1992/93 season and intensified in 1994 and 1995, further measures consistent with the political shift towards self reliance were adopted by both Federal and State governments. In March 1992 the Queensland Government released a book entitled *Drought: Managing for Self Reliance*. This publication endorses self-reliance as the key to ensuring that drought is incorporated into farmers' 'normal' planning processes. As the document states, the goal of the Queensland Government's drought policy is: ‘To achieve a level of self-reliance within Queensland's rural industries such that the risk of drought is adequately covered by sound property planning and management practices’ (Queensland Government, 1992: 8). Drought here is seen as but one variable that needs to be factored into farmers' management strategies. While self-reliance is ultimately
encouraged, the document acknowledges that a transition period is needed where 'interim' government assistance may be necessary. The document goes on to note that a self-reliant approach is fundamental to ‘minimise the social, economic and environmental impact of severe climatic events’ (Queensland Government, 1992: 9). Self-reliance is now assumed to be crucial not only in sending the 'correct' market signals to farmers, but also in providing a panacea for farm sustainability.

At the Commonwealth level, December 1994 saw the Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee submit its report entitled: Rural Adjustment, Rural Debt and Rural Reconstruction. This Review reiterated the view expressed in the National Drought Policy that individual land-holders 'should be responsible for preparing and managing for variable climatic, seasonal and industry conditions' (Senate, 1994: xi). However, the Review recognises that there remained extreme circumstances which no farmer could be expected to adequately plan. Nevertheless, a more consistent, uniform and long-term approach to drought was generally encouraged. The integration of exceptional circumstances provisions within the Rural Adjustment Scheme is criticised in this respect as being inconsistent with the long-term RAS objectives of productivity, profitability and sustainability. Exceptional circumstances were seen as 'distorting' market signals by involving government in farmers' risk management strategies. The only way that farmers could make the most 'efficient' decisions were if exceptional circumstances were 'demand driven' (Senate, 1994: xii). This view supports the overall government philosophy of 'privatised' risk management.

Another Review of drought support was announced in August 1995. The Task Force established for this Review had two major purposes:

- examine existing drought response measures and evaluate the impact and appropriateness of these and the relative contributions of the Commonwealth and drought affected States, in meeting the objectives of the National Drought Policy; and


Thus the overall purpose of drought relief remained the same, that is, moving towards a self-reliant model where the producer undertook responsibility for drought as a 'managed risk'. However, this was despite the fact that for many of the producers who formed part of this study, were already experiencing their fourth season of drought conditions, something which, as they argue, was extremely difficult to 'manage for'.

The Task Force Report (1996) also identified some areas where future government intervention could be channelled. First, an improved 'understanding of drought policy'. Thus the Task Force felt that the 'problem' was one of education and the way in which policy was being 'communicated' to key stakeholders (Williams, 1997:9). Second, that welfare needs were being acutely felt by families and communities and third, that any future drought policies must be in tune with 'the inevitable process of structural adjustment in Australia's rural industries' (Williams, 1997: 8). Here, the Task Force endorsed and strengthened the principle of self-reliance agreed to in 1992;
it argued against 'poor policy responses' such as fodder subsidies and it strongly suggested increased training and education opportunities which enabled a 'knowledge transfer' to occur and thus producer's could increase their understanding of managed risk. The Task Force also adopted Property Management Planning (PMP) which was 'widely supported as being in line with enterprise improvement principles to help farmers achieve self-reliance through improved business practices and awareness' (Williams, 1997:9). One of the Task Force's key conclusions is that objectives of the National Drought Policy need to be emphasised:

- encouraging the adoption of a self-reliant approach;
- encouraging good natural resource management;
- improving understanding of drought and drought policy;
- ensuring farm families are provided with the means to secure their welfare requirements; and
- ensuring that elements of the NDP do not impede structural adjustment


As Williams argues, the Task Force's recommendations took drought policy further along the road of an 'individualistic philosophy' which focused on 'achieving self-reliance' the immediate consequence of which was 'further increasing the onus of farmer responsibility in drought-proofing' (1997:10). There was also the imperative of ensuring that responses to drought did not inhibit structural adjustment. That is to say, too much of an emphasis on state welfare might 'distort' market signals and therefore the risk management practices of farmers. In addition, Williams suggests that there were three flawed assumptions underpinning this policy - first, that farmers' lack education, second, that they lack access to networks and finally, and importantly, that they are 'free to make real choices about risk' (1997: 10). This latter point must be placed in the context of farmers always being recognised as a 'proud and self-reliant' group, which was in control of its industry.

In 1996 the Rural Adjustment Scheme was subjected to a mid-term review (see McColl, Donald & Shearer, 1997). The Review found that the self-reliance philosophy of the National Drought Policy 'had not been well understood', and that this had led to a confusion between 'normal' (or 'manageable') drought and 'exceptional' drought (McColl, Donald & Shearer, 1997: 68). The outcomes of this review contributed significantly to the Commonwealth's Agriculture - Advancing Australia policy (known as the 'Triple A' package) announced on 14 September 1997. This policy basically abolished RAS 1992 and sought to clearly distinguish farm business objectives from welfare measures. Drought was now to be viewed as insurable through financial institutions, except in extreme circumstances where the government would provide some assistance. This was presumably to give the right signals to farmers and encourage the shift towards self-reliance as soon as possible. The 'Triple A' package encourages the fostering of business risk management and skills development, as well as access to an 'adequate welfare safety net'. Some of the key features relevant to drought 'management' include:
• more attractive financial risk management tools through the creation of a **Farm Management Deposits (FMDs) Scheme** to replace Income Equalisation Deposits and Farm Management Bonds. The FMDs Scheme is fully commercialised and is run through financial institutions rather than the DPIE.

• help for individual farm businesses to profit from change by building on their business management skills under the **Farm Business Improvement Program** (FarmBis).

• continuation of a demand-driven **Exceptional Circumstances** assistance for farmers including - creation of a new **Exceptional Circumstances Relief Payment** to replace the Drought Relief Payment and, a phase-down in the level of interest subsidies available under exceptional circumstances. (Anderson, 1997 n.p.).

The revised drought policies - charted here briefly from 1989 onwards have resulted in most producers believing that governments wish to 'eliminate the need to provide assistance ... by 'inevitable' structural adjustment [and] ensuring in the mean time that a little money goes a long way' (Williams, 1997: 11). This appears to particularly be the case with the recent scrapping of interest rate subsidies (McKenzie, 1997).

Regardless of the government's call for better management practices and the rejection of drought as a natural disaster, there is enough evidence to suggest that farm families are disadvantaged. Government assistance is often not conducive to the culture of the rural sector. The bush psyche has been permeated with an historic mentality of independence and battling against the odds of a natural disaster such as drought. The redefinition of 'drought' has had, perhaps unintended, but nevertheless far-reaching, consequences. Regional and rural Australia still expects to be supported in this crisis. The next chapter begins to explore in more details the effects of drought policies on producers.
Findings: Managing the ‘External’ Environment

Well, you see what has happened is that the people who have survived the drought most are those who have taken the most cautious extremely conservative management approaches (Former male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

It is the financial strain as well, when you are trying to pipe water around or put drains down, but it is also the concern that you feel when you see the animals when they obviously suffer in a drought even when you're doing the best you can, and it puts a strain on all the members of the family, working the long hours and worrying about it (Female sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

A successful grazier is ... one that plans for a drought although it is hard to plan for a drought because a drought will creep up but you can, probably, make it a bit easier by preparing and making more water holes, and ... grow and store feed for drought times ... on a salt-bush block you can't really provide feed or put away a quantity of feed because most of them don’t have a crop in to grow hay and bale it (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1996).

7.1 Introduction

The experiences and interpretations of drought of and by producers are central to our analysis of a ‘social construction’. There are advantages in seeking to understand the experience of drought from the point of view of producers (and ex-producers). Their voices provide an opportunity to understand their interpretation of the drought (and of other problems they are facing). What these experiences reveal are the various ‘tensions’ implicit in rural production in times of drought. These are:

- the extent to which production levels should be maintained or reduced; decisions to work the property full time or to seek off farm work;
- how limited funds should be expended;
- decisions to remain ‘independent’ or to seek drought relief;
- the extent to which natural resources should be ‘exhausted’ before decisions are made to remove stock;
- decisions about future expenditures on drought proofing; and whether to abandon farming altogether;
- the availability of support from governments

7.2 Drought and agricultural restructuring

According to the views of the many producers who took part in our interviews and focus groups, it can be concluded that the drought has had, and continues to have, major impacts in relation to farm production, the environment, and the people working the properties. To what extent, though, are wider restructuring processes being promoted, or being retarded, by the drought? The partial conclusion to be drawn from this report is that the drought has acted to do both. The necessity for family members to take off farm work, to seek new options such as feedlotting and small-scale manufacturing, and for women to become increasingly involved in on-farm
work are consistent with existing strategies aimed at assisting in keeping the farm economically viable. They conform to, rather than challenge, wider processes which have been identified with the restructuring of agriculture.

In contrast, with very little money to purchase new equipment, to increase property size or to move off the land, producers are ignoring other wider restructuring tendencies. The view of many producers that they will stay on, despite continuing low commodity prices and poor rainfall is indicative of the capacity of the petty bourgeoisie to ‘belt tighten’ in the face of economic decline (see Gray et al, 1993) and of the tenacity of agrarian fundamentalist beliefs (Halpin and Martin, 1996). But such ‘stubbornness’ in the face of continuing poor economic conditions will almost certainly condemn many to a life of periodic poverty, where they remain asset rich, but income poor. It will retard the amalgamation of farms and with it the possibility that new purchasers with new monies might act to reorganise production so that it is more economically viable and environmentally sound. It also reflects the extent to which their political lobbying has resulted in government underwriting of the drought and the mobilisation of popular opinion in support of assistance for the ‘struggling’ producer.

7.3 Towards sustainable agriculture

That the producers understand environmental damage to have been a direct consequence of overstocking and poor management suggests something of concern to those interested in sustainability in agriculture. It would seem that many are aware that producers in their district have purposely overstocked knowing that relief would be available. Others feel quite angry that government funds have gone to those who have managed their properties badly. Despite changes to government drought policies (where those policies now encourage on-farm drought management as a normal part of risk management) it would seem that the state of the export markets will continue to lead to the environment being exploited in future production periods. This will occur, not because the producers are unaware of the consequences of their actions in overstocking, but because - in the context of small-scale property ownership, limited capital, poor international demand for agricultural products, and the drought - the most obvious way that producers can survive is to increase their stocking (and turnoff) rates. Our research has identified that banks have been implicated in promoting such a strategy. This is only too obvious in New South Wales:

    ... banks ... have got this thing about the western division - the equity. You can borrow about 20 or 30 per cent on your equity. That is a joke. You wouldn't even be able to buy your next door's house paddock out. As you come from the east, as you come westwards, the equity drops off because we live too far away from Sydney ... (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

7.4 Management responses

This section addresses the responses identified by our interviews. It is preceded with some background analysis of respondents’ answers. Ninety percent of respondents report that their farm is in an area which is currently drought-declared at the time of interviews. Some farms have seen rain recently but only nineteen per cent of respondents feel that their drought had been broken at the time of interview. Sixty-
four per cent are eligible for government assistance under the ‘exceptional circumstances’ provisions of the Rural Adjustment Scheme. Sixty-nine percent feel that the current drought is worse than that of the 1980s. For twenty-nine per cent, their normally reliable water supply for the home had dried up. For 40 per cent, the normally reliable supply for stock had dried up. Eighteen per cent have to buy water for domestic use. Most of the producers that we spoke to as part of this study understood the policy changes discussed in the previous chapter only too well. They also understood (and many appreciated) the need for a ‘managed risk’ approach - indeed, as this section of the chapter identifies, the notion of a ‘good manager’ for many of those interviewed is someone who does ‘prepare ahead’. However the notion of ‘risk’ can be see in the context of the vagaries of climate and commodity price fluctuations as essentially one of a gamble. Indeed if those of us who undertook some of the focus groups were to summarise our impressions we would point to the producers view of themselves as persistent risk-takers - gamblers might be unkind but they really do want to believe that their luck is about to change. One exchange in a focus group in the Western Riverina exemplifies this:

It is a good as your operator. It is how good your place is ... one bloke can make a living with 5000 sheep and another can’t make a living out of 15,000 sheep. Simple as that. Good as you are yourself, you can make what you are.

... the harder you work, the more luck you have.

You make your luck. If it rains, we are lucky.

The following tables identify the responses to key questions from all the respondents. The perceived effects of drought on farm production levels is shown below in Table 1, indicating that for more than one third of respondents, the drought had either eliminated farm production altogether or reduced it to its lowest level ever. Seventy-seven per cent stated that farm production contributed 100 per cent of their income, with the lowest proportion being 50 per cent. About half the respondents reported that they had taken the drastic step of selling breeding stock with fifteen per cent saying they had done so extensively.

Table 1
Effect of drought on farm output - n=103

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% respondents</th>
<th>Qld</th>
<th>NSW</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eliminated output completely</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced it to its lowest point ever</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced it substantially</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced it to below average</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had little effect</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had no effect</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Cost reduction is the most extensively practiced strategy for coping with drought (Tables 2-4). Selling stock is also common, with apparent reluctance to sell breeding stock. Selling other stock was, however, very common, with four fifths of respondents reporting using it as a management strategy to some extent.
Table 2
Frequency of use of management strategies during drought
Queensland - n=49

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Not possible</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Moderately</th>
<th>Extensively</th>
<th>Very extensively</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Put stock on agistment</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take in agisted stock</td>
<td>71</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold breeding stock</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold other stock</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took stock on the road</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelled paddocks</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced hired labour</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-property work</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut-back property costs</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut-back household costs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planted a new crop</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Strategy</td>
<td>Not possible</td>
<td>Not at all</td>
<td>A little</td>
<td>Moderately</td>
<td>Extensively</td>
<td>Very extensively</td>
<td>Total</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>----------------------------------</td>
<td>--------------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>----------</td>
<td>------------</td>
<td>-------------</td>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Put stock on agistment</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>46</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take in agisted stock</td>
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<td>72</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold breeding stock</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold other stock</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took stock on the road</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelled paddocks</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced hired labour</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-property work</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>56</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut-back property costs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut-back household costs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planted a new crop</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table 4
Frequency of use of management strategies during drought
Total n = 103

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategy</th>
<th>Not possible</th>
<th>Not at all</th>
<th>A little</th>
<th>Moderately</th>
<th>Extensively</th>
<th>Very extensively</th>
<th>Total % age</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Put stock on agistment</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take in agisted stock</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold breeding stock</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold other stock</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took stock on the road</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>76</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelled paddocks</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced hired labour</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Off-property work</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut-back property costs</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut-back household costs</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planted a new crop</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Totals may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

There is recognition of a range of strategies and their adoption. Eighty-three per cent of respondents stated that there are farmers in their area who are recognised as better managers of drought. When asked how the best farmers manage drought, the most common reply from respondents is 'being ‘well prepared'. Drought then seems to be something frequently planned for, or at least farmers see that as the strategy used by the best among them.
The importance of selling stock, and indeed the property itself, is indicated by responses to questions about the biggest decision faced during drought (Table 6). The types of decisions indicated are clearly very significant to the future of the properties and their families.

Table 7, however, shows that participation in making those major decisions is not seen to be equitable among men and women. More than one in four men say that they made the decision alone, while 85 per cent of women see themselves as only partly involved in making such a decision and 10 per cent saw themselves as not involved at all.
Table 7
Contributions to the biggest decision made during drought by men and women
n = 103

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Contribution to decision</th>
<th>Qld</th>
<th>NSW</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Men</td>
<td>Women</td>
<td>Men</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Made alone</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took a lead</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partly involved</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not involved</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total (n)</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7.5 Producers’ views on management

7.5.1. The relationship with governments: Male and female producers were asked their views as to current relationship with the state - in the form of both Federal and State governments, as well as Local government and the many service organisations that act to mediate between farm families and the state. In discussion about the impact of drought on their families one women responded that:

I know the government idea was that we should have put money away, but in our situation we had borrowed money and we had very high interest rates and those high interest rates continued so that’s where our money was going. Everyone had huge debts even before the drought - the high 1980s (Female beef producer, CQ, 1997).

We asked the respondents a series of questions regarding their views of the relationship between the producers and government - both Federal, State and Local. In the Central Queensland region the majority male responses indicated that state government responses were inadequate, with only a few agreeing with ‘generous’ or ‘about right’. Local Government was evenly distributed between the ‘about right’ response and ‘inadequate’ response. Only one respondent believed that Local Government was ‘generous’. The majority of women in CQ felt that Local Government response was ‘inadequate’, with a few who believed their response was ‘about right’ and none that it was ‘generous’. Women were evenly distributed in their belief that both Federal and State Governments were responding ‘about right’ to the drought, but an equivalent number felt such response was ‘inadequate’. Only a very few agreed that it was ‘generous’.

In the western rangelands the producers felt strongly (as recently as November 1997) about the way in which they had been treated by both Federal, State and Local Governments. One women summarised it as follows:

Well, the RASAC committee wouldn’t have come out here unless it had been community pressure to get them here. They wouldn’t have come under their own, [without] sort of, a push from the Department of Ag NSW, which is where it has to come from. It wouldn’t have happened. And at Wentworth they, at the moment, are trying to get Exceptional Circumstances status at Wentworth Falls. They have a committee over there, and they’ve had deputations and all the rest, but I think that
the Dept of Ag. in NSW, I mean, up until now, we haven’t had any support as far as the Dept of Ag goes. We now have an agronomist come rangelands officer at Baronga, who has only been in the job for six months, and he’s got a huge area. He’s got to cover way over to the South Australian border and right up to Broken Hill and out as far as here. So as far as the Dept of Ag, I feel, through drought and RASAC have really let us down. Without the Rural Counselling Service and people like [rural counsellor] and our ranger At Balranald, the area would never have got into drought exception circumstances. There were a number of public meetings weren’t there, for people and then the RASAC committee did come (Female sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

To the question ‘Do people here feel neglected by the government?’ the responses were consistent. In Central Queensland, where the drought was in its fifth season when our interviews were conducted, feelings ran high:

Country people as a whole do ... I think most country people do feel neglected by the Government ... I don’t think the government could care if we were here or not (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

Because they know how we vote and votes count. And we don’t change our vote very often. And they say ‘we have got your vote. You are not good to us anyway’. Why worry on our account? (Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

Not surprisingly, people indicated that their feelings about the government varied from time to time. One male beef producer felt differently for the first three years of the drought but now in 1996, after five years, felt that Governments were responding and the region was not neglected.

For a long time they did [nothing]. They just sat on their hands. They just didn’t recognise the situation. It went on and on until eventually Tom Burns [Deputy Premier, Labor Government] came down and went back and told them it was bloody bad and they should do something about it (Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

In some cases, the producers felt that the money being spent was incorrectly allocated or wasted. In the western rangelands of New South Wales, for example, money allocated for Landcare was often misguided, according to one producer:

... I can be a bit cynical I suppose, it comes from further up the government tree. There is money being handed out - you are a facilitator, well, we’ll make you a facilitator too. This sort of thing. Rather than let us - give [us] the Soil Con. Service [back] which is gone now ... yes, yes, been really bent, but it has sort of been gutted hasn’t it? (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1996).

A further question regarding ‘how the response of Government might be improved’ elicited the following responses from both regions:

The Federal Government, well I suppose the fact that they [agreed to a range of] 70 years of rainfall, really sticking unrealistic criteria for areas that have been subdivided - there was no recognition for areas that were subdivided after the Second World War to the effect that they wouldn’t have records necessary to trigger the criteria (Female sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

... we should be given tax incentives for conservation farming and conservation equipment (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).
‘Sack the Australian Meat and Livestock - they do very little for [their money]. They should be overseas trying to market our meat better’ (Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

[It is] probably a bit late for this drought. As far as managing rural, you can’t make plans while you are under economic pressure. You can’t really manage properly. I don’t know if they could do something to take a bit of the heat off financially, economically. ... Encourage people, whether it is tax incentives or something, to provide better for drought. So you are not forced to do things that you would rather not do (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

The first thing they have got to do is change that image of the country person. The image not within our lives but the image with the [community] with regard to the people on the land. They seem to think that because money is in town ... the drought has broken. They think that rain is the answer to the drought [and once] you get the rain the drought is over - they forget about the other things that go with the drought (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

Nobody seems to know what they are doing, you can’t get a definite answer out of anyone who is meant to have the right to give you that go ahead or not. They cannot tell you yes or no. Always ducking around. Give the people what they give the job to the right to say yes or no (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

7.5.2 The struggle for ‘knowledges’: For many of the producers we spoke to, their relationship with their property became a struggle between those ‘experts’ who provided advice counter to their own perceived experience in managing their properties. As the drought proceeded, such experts became more common. This issue was a shared experience for all those we spoke to - in both regions. Very often, such ‘experts’ were individuals who did not have any direct experience in the region, with that type of soil, stock or climate. One conversation with a focus group of male producers in New South Wales in November 1997 characterises this issue:

We had a meeting ... we had a bloke from Canberra from the Environmental Bureau or something, but we got half way down [to the meeting] and ... wanted to stop and have a look at the different types of saltbush, you know, just on the side of the road, because to him it was all bush - and blue bush is the same as saltbush. And we got back to the car, the bloke sitting in the back said ‘why did you cut all the trees down here?’ He just assumed that this country had all been cleared and, because he assumed that Australia was covered by timber, which it wasn’t - but from a bloke with an environmental base he should have known about things like that (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

At that group, another producer had a similar experience

We did a RASAC tour out to Balranald and to Hatfield, and we were driving along the road there, and there was onion weed all along the side of the road. And this one fellow said, ‘well, look you have terrific golden feed, what’s the drought problem?’ We had to very quickly jump on him and tell him what onion weed was. And then on top of that they had come from our area to Wilcannia, where there is no bush at all, and they assumed that we would have to have all our bush eaten to the ground to be on a similar situation as Wilcannia. And each time they came we would go through the same procedure (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

7.5.3 Managing stock: In the beef producing area of Central Queensland, stock management often equated with either selling the animals early or finding agistment for them. In our discussions with beef producers, making this crucial decision - sell,
keep or agist - was a common milestone. In one focus group we were told that one beef producer, consequently seen by his peers as a ‘good manager’, made an early decision to agist. A decision which had consequences for his property but which he did not regret. He made the decision based on information he was receiving from weather reports. In addition, his equity in his property was high, and he had access to resources needed to agist. Here is his narrative:

We got the big rain first in ‘91 then we got nothing at all for [the rest of] ‘91. I knew in ’92 that I was in diabolical trouble - calves all over the place, my cows were poor I had steers that I couldn’t fatten. In one way it was lucky - we missed all the summer storms [that year] we got nothing, that I was forced out early.

I could get agistment ... so I weaned all my calves at 70 kilos. they were prime fellows. The technique was to be able to handle that - pack up 800 head of cattle and.... I never brought anything back. Looking at it in hindsight, that agistment was the best thing I could have done because, in the short term, I could turn poor cows and poor steers into fat cows and fat steers and I sold them on a good market. The animals left behind, I sold all the no.2. heifers for $60 I reduced the numbers as quickly as I could and I kept that core breeding herd. I knew I was in drought. The other thing was the advances in weather forecasting. The SOI, the sea surface temperatures - they’re good.

My equity was high, but in hindsight I was lucky in that I was forced out early and that really was what it was all about. I was forced out of home early so I had to make those decisions early - ahead of a lot people. I was lucky to get good agistment close and I sold on a good market. We kept on going you see, we had no respite at all. and that was really what saved me, being forced away from home that first year.

7.5.4 Managing water: The relationship between available water and effective property management is a strong one. We asked our respondents a series of questions about their water management. Strategies of water management were different in the two regions and between the regions. Keeping water up to the stock became an all consuming exercise. Here a male sheep/wheat producer reflects on it:

The pressure thing [is] with water. Because without water the stock are going to be without water, so it is just an ongoing thing like having to clean your teeth everyday, going around [the] wretched water, and then there is something always not working. ... how much longer can you keep going when you are continuously going year in, year out?

In a later chapter, we discuss some experiences women had in undertaking tasks such as watering stock. Here one woman in NSW identifies the relationship between stress, decision making and water management:

Well, it's a constant keeping water and motors and pumps going. [Our major decision was] extending our pipeline. ... In 1992 we put the bore down which we had to finance completely and really, honestly, we just couldn’t afford to do it but we had to go ahead and do it so that was a major decision and we haven’t even started to pay the principal on that yet (1996). But, now, that decision has been a very, very important decision that we made because we, at the moment, probably only have 2,000 [stock] left on I think if we didn’t have that bore ... it was stressful, yes, deciding to put that bore down and working through the scenario ... getting the finance (Female sheep/wheat producer, NSW,1996).
In Central Queensland the struggle for water was also a constant. In this country, dry spells were often broken by torrential rain which has its own consequences, as one producer, who attempted to diversify his product, explains:

... the rainfall it is always a big problem with a country like ours that is undulating like ours. When you try to diversify into crops and expand your income, you can actually double your income of your property, I can't sustain it because don't get a good season regularly. It's an erratic rainfall. Of course you have got fallow land which is exposed to the storms and the type of rainfall that you get here - the Riverina gets a different kind of rain, Here you get a thunderstorm, most of the rain falls in a thunderstorm, you have your paddock ploughed up - its undulating, erosion is disastrous (Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

The relentless long term effects of drought on the land in Central Queensland was also of deep concern to the producers.

I think even without disturbing the country, [there are] issues of cultivating, ... during the past ten year, we've seen .... [our] creek with every gully that leads into it - with a great bank of soil in that creek, and we are getting waterholes filled up with soil. We are just getting storm rain, pelting down, takes the soil into the creek ...

Their management experiences trying to find the water they need to maintain their stock and to remain with their families on their properties was also instructive, as these five male beef producers point out:

We are on the Dawson River. In 1994 we had to dig sand trenches and pump two hours on two hours off to get water out of the river.

We had to get water in to wash our clothes this drought the last few years.

We had to buy drinking water and stock water and water for the washing and so on. we had to bring it in last year and the year before we had the rain in January (1995).

We also had to buy in drinking water. I was lucky our lad was working on the council and he had a couple of weekend jobs and he would fill them up for us, because we couldn’t really drink the water out of the sand (river). If you have ever drunk sand water you know what I mean. It is black - you don’t need to put a tea bag in the water, that’s the way it comes.

Water can allow you to use your feed a little more - use a lot more of your country. You can also take your cattle away from natural, traditional water places and get them to use other pieces of your land - supplement them.

7.6 Identifying the issues
During August and September 1994, The Queensland DPI, held a number of local best practice meetings with (male) beef producers in the CQ region - at the time when the drought was in its fourth season for some. Although - as expected - differences emerged according to the locations within the region - a fairly clear picture developed of a group of producers struggling against the elements (and conditions within the industry) to survive. A number of key points emerged which are pertinent to this study and which echo our own findings. First, there was seen to be ‘severe pressure on natural resources’ as a combination of: a drought of three to four years; declining returns to producers; high interest rates; increasing debt burdens; increasing costs;
increasing need to control weeds such as rubbervine. Overstocking was in some cases seen to be ‘forced’:

Stocking rates are influenced by financial difficulties a producer may experience. Stocking rates may be increased to meet financial commitments. The pressures imposed by financiers and limited property size can be very significant. Banks tend to want producers to stock up to the value of their capital outlay...if fodder is produced and stored on farm for use in dry seasons and droughts, the bank exerts pressure to increase stocking rates on the property to take advantage of these fodder reserves every year, or whenever they are available. The problems with lack of resources to deal with droughts will then still occur because the drought mitigation measures have been used (DPI, 1994:5).

Second, some groups argued that given that the land was now viewed as a public asset, governments needed to give incentives to producers to: take the pressure off the land. It was felt that the

... burden... should be shared by the community. Primary producers are currently in an impossible financial position which makes it difficult to remove pressure from the natural resources...Self regulation may be a way that producers can keep control in their own hands...Producers are the people best equipped to manage the land resource. The major emphasis in the legislation should be on encouraging producers to do the right thing, rather than regulation...codes of practice for different industries...may assist self regulation(DPI, 1994:3).

Third, drought management options included:

- supplementary feeding of livestock
- agistment
- sale of livestock at auction
- sale of livestock to commercial feedlots
- clearing vegetation to increase the area for grazing
- moving to the coast during the period
- ‘doing nothing’ - not considered to be a realistic option by most

These beef producers agreed that ‘stocking rates are influenced by financial difficulties a producer may be experiencing (and) may be increased to meet financial commitments. The pressures imposed by financiers and limited property size can be very significant’ (DPI, 1994:5).

Fourth, other strategies to improve income during drought included:

- working off the farm;
- using farm machinery to generate income off the farm;
- having land available for cropping if rains fall;
- establishing a ‘small manufacturing business’ (DPI, 1994:8).

Finally, producers spoke not only about rainfall, but about being in a ‘money drought’ based on continually low prices – ‘producers are having difficulty putting food on the table and buying essentials like clothes...’(DPI, 1994:5). Producers therefore had their own view of the way their land should be managed and they held little respect for anyone who might pretend to that knowledge or simply attempt to apply what they
had learned elsewhere. The notion that land is to become a community responsibility, with regulation or imposition by banks or government agencies confronts the problem that specialised knowledge is applicable in different situations. Drought management issues are no exception.

### 7.7 ‘Managing’ in an era of self-reliance

This next section of the chapter is primarily devoted to detailing the producers which emerged during our study and which corroborated those views expressed to DPI Queensland as discussed above. These points should be read as ‘lessons’ from the experiences of those producers managing in difficult times within policies of ‘self-reliance’ and ‘managed risk’. Some of these lessons reinforce the point that some producers are working to increase the sustainability of their land. They do react to threats from drought in that way and they do see themselves as achieving improvements. These points are:

#### 7.7.1 That there is no agreed definition of drought:

Our interviews in both regions bore out the strength of this issue:

> So to try to manage the ups and downs of no knowing are we really in it, are we facing a really severe drought or is [this] just a dry period? T think that that is one of the things we have found hard in this (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997)

> It is a long period without rain. It is the stress and the hardship. We had a financial drought...prior to going into the climatic drought (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

> Drought [is] an act of nature that you have just got to work your way through. You can complain about things you can control, but you can’t complain about things you can’t control (Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

> I think you are pretty aware that it is (drought) because the rainfall is half of what it was the year before and it is getting pretty tough to feed. The problem at that stage of the game is that you don’t know when it is going to finish...(Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

#### 7.7.2 The inability of producers to afford paid labour:

Male producers were working longer hours and women were working to save on labour costs and off farm to generate income. This was most often mentioned by women as it impacted directly on their lifestyles. As a result there were a number of producers who were operating in a ‘barter system’ with neighbours.

Ringing around to do this [calling people to the focus group], there are a lot of people who couldn’t come because they were working. One woman said to me that her husband is away doing contract work and she is working full-time, and she said that ‘we are working to sustain a hobby of farming’. But that is all a given though, that is how it is (Female sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997)

You feel guilty as a mother because you have got to go to work. It’s difficult. You are relying on help from your partner, he is absolutely buggered too (Female beef producer - working off farm, CQ, 1996).
When you are mustering you get your neighbour in, you wouldn't pay them...(Neighbours) wouldn't muster at the same time, they get their neighbours, they get them, they wouldn't pay, just help each other out. I am hearing a lot more of those type of things - barter - more than I ever have... (Female beef producer - working off farm, CQ,1996).

7.7.3 Managed risk is both a reality and a strategy: The risks of farming are both a problem and a challenge. However, the notion that a ‘turn of season’ can lead to a major improvement in income seems to keep people from completely despairing of climatic conditions. There is always that chance of a ‘windfall’ around the corner in the rural industry.

It's so hard to tell the difference between good luck and good management. I guess I'd agree. It's probably important, well there has to be luck in it in that predicting what will happen to the market, I mean feeding is, I mean if the market stays up feeding is the correct strategy if the market drops feeding is not the correct strategy. You don't know when you make that choice which way it's going to go. It has become and particularly prices have become even more unstable...and so the best advice at the time maybe the market looks OK so you feed cattle and at the end of it you find out it was wrong (Male beef producer,CQ,1996)

7.7.4 Risk management strategy had its potential dangers: There were personal consequences associated with a risk management strategy, some of which are discussed in more detail in the next chapter. Here, the voice of a visiting rural general practitioner puts the risks in a health context:

When you were talking about autonomy and things before, the word that came to mind was enslavement. People are just enslaved. I don't think people have much by way of autonomy if they have to start pumps every day when they need water. They are certainly enslaved to that whole process of needing to keep that property going (Female rural GP,CQ,1996).

7.7.5 The negative impacts on the environment: Pressure on the environment was recognised by many producers - the following comments come from a husband and wife partnership who eventually decided to sell their property and move into town. While a difficult decision to take, both were still relatively young and therefore able to take up other employment opportunities.

You have to generate more cash to run more cattle - you have to put more pressure on your property to be able to keep up the standard of requirements that you need either to pay off a debt or just to go out there and survive and that is what is forcing a lot of land into earl(y) drought. In years gone by they would have got by with natural water - they never had the cattle per acre. You never had the land cleared...I mean everything is different, nowadays (Male beef producer, CQ,1996).

Well, [our stocking rates] weren't as high as the neighbours and they were dry throughout and we were certainly not as highly stocked as they were. I suppose it comes back to people who don't really know what to do. You know, you have got cattle there and it costs money to send then away, to agist, and they hang on and hang on and...and the grass [does] get depleted, so people do keep cattle on the country for longer than we should because you are probably being optimistic... (Female beef producer, CQ.1996).
7.7.6 Overstocking and environmental management: The problem of overstocking is clearly linked to environmental degradation. For many producers - this becomes an intolerable management burden.

If the land is flogged out, no grass, the grass that comes back is the poorer natural types not your better natural types, white spear that we have got up there everywhere that has been there. It was probably overstocked before we moved here and that is the grass that comes back which is not as good (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

[I'm] not worried about the trees, the more that die the better. We've got more problem weeds now... too many trees. Yes. ... if you leave this country alone for 20 years or 50 years it will be back to where it was. It is probably worse than what it was 100 years ago. Much further out west, creek, regrowth not enough dies, there are patches that did die. Maybe if (the drought) had of gone on for another 10 years it would have done a good job (Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

... the theory for a lot of academics is you destock the whole place, and you sell every head off and risk the country. Well, we all know in reality you can't do that not if it's ok if you have some other income coming in from other areas, but to completely destock and to start again ... there have been people who have destocked ... they have bought sheep thinking they were going into a good season and then they have had one or two good rains then they're back into the dry period again and have lost money (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

If you decide to cut right back on your numbers, you just cannot leave a paddock there. [If] you leave a paddock there, especially a grass paddock ... you just get in the neighbourhood kangaroos and emus ... that that happens virtually every time. Even if you cut the numbers down on these paddocks, the 'roo population grows to the extent where you may as well have had the sheep there. You still need the paddock ... (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

7.7.7 The size of the property was important: This effect on the land is caused not only by nature, but also by on-farm decision making. The beef producers in CQ echoed the views of sheep/wheat producers in NSW about the loss of productivity due to commodity prices and drought, and the lessening possibility of being able to make a living from their properties.

... the number of people now living on the land compared with what it was in the '55 drought or the '69. A lot of the property where I live was owned by one person. We now four properties in one holding. A lot of properties have been subdivided up to smaller areas. 44,000 acres is now supporting four families - four ten thousand acre blocks make one 40,000 block. You are taxing the land more than what that one owner was doing. You are putting one family in there - who have to support a wife and three kids - a truck a shed a tractor, that sort of thing, whereas before the whole property was controlled by one family. The land is being taxed more. we are putting it under more pressure (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

7.7.8 Opportunities as strategies: There were however perceived to be some ‘opportunities’ and ‘lessons’ which were a direct consequence of drought.

I reckon I have learned a lot from the drought. It has given me a much better appreciation of species change, degradation. It has given me a much clearer attitude to selling - no hangups about personal likes and dislikes - a much more rigorous approach to the management of it (Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).
We created more dam space. That is probably one of the best things that have come out of this drought. Most people have done that, made their dams bigger. Because if you haven't got water you haven't got anything (Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

[When we were kids] there used to be just drifting sand, you could see it drifted up around the house and shearing sheds up to the base of it and half way up the box trees and around the verandah paddock, and that’s going back to the 20s and 30s,... but as I say nowadays you don’t tend to get that erosion (Female sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

It would be fair to say that 90 per cent of people got through the drought by seriously eroding the equity they had in their property and extending their overdrafts further and further every year (Former male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

We conclude this chapter by reinforcing the point that producers see farming as a risk to be managed, not just in the sense that they ‘take risks’ by adopting certain management practices, or not managing at all. Rather, we suggest that they have always seen drought as a risk to be managed rather than a sequence of disaster which might go away. The drought of the 1990s has painfuely clarified this strategy.
Findings: Managing the ‘Internal’ Environment

My whole life has been absolutely changed from it. I think we suffered enormous stress originally when we were still coming to grips with it. It is really hard. I wish it would go away and never come back again. I’d imagine [that] people will say ‘people were born in the drought, things happened in the drought, people were married in the drought’, it will become a landmark, a benchmark in history, because it has had such a significant effect (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996.)

8.1 Overview
Many of the problems which create situations of poor health in rural Australia are qualitatively different from those in urban areas. Income from agriculture, in particular, is directly connected to climatic factors. Farmers’ means of coping with change are also different, as is the context of social relationships at family and community level in which coping occurs. In order to understand processes of decision-making within, and coping with drought it is necessary to appreciate the cultural and social milieux in which farming people find themselves. This chapter should be read in the context of other reports now emerging about the impact of the rural crisis on farm families.

This chapter begins to explore what we have termed the ‘internal’ personal environment as opposed to the ‘external’ farm environment. Here we will begin to explore issues of rural families’ health and well-being in times of crisis and reflect on the drought management strategies, family relationships, partnership between spouses - those ‘internal’ strategies which have been developed by those who have stayed and ‘managed’ the drought.

8.2 Detraditionalisation
In cultural terms, rural Australia has a tradition which remains identifiably different from urban society (Gray, 1994a, Gray 1994b). As we have discussed elsewhere, this seen in terms of conservatism (Kelly, 1987) but it can also be seen in terms of a rural ideology which involves belief in such personal attributes as self-reliance, willingness to work hard and independence, and beliefs in the family institution, a spirit of community and farming as an ennobling way of life. Australian agriculture has developed with a farming system operated essentially by families, members of which share work and each other's livelihoods as well as home. Home, work and family are intimately connected to the farm. These factors make the rural situation a different context for the experience of stress, especially when such stress involves the farm and a threat to the family and its traditions. Our study has identified that the ‘de-traditionalisation’ of the family farm in Australia is occurring at a rapid rate (see also Gray and Philips, 1996) as the combined impact of falling commodity prices, climatic conditions and high interest rates are being acutely felt. Farmers stand to lose much

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5 Many of these were identified at the first National Public Rural Health Forum held in Adelaide in October, 1997.
more than a job (Duncan, Volk and Lewis, 1988) and it should not be assumed that the apparent intimacy of farm and family life provides a buffer against social and emotional difficulties.

Farmers have long been known to resist the forces which are acting to undermine their economic viability - even when rational economic judgement would suggest that they should leave. This apparently irrational persistence has been evident for a long time (see Bendix, 1966:22) and is implied in the recent work of Pfitzner (1992). Farmer (1986) sees this persistence in association with psychological problems, especially among those who must decide whether to persist or surrender and seek an alternative livelihood elsewhere. Our early focus group discussions with both male and female producers highlighted this dilemma. Often the younger producers were able to make such decisions because they were still able to find alternative employment, decisions that were denied to the older producers. For example

I took the decision [to leave] when I could still see my equity, ... I left when I still had equity. I wasn’t going to sit there until I owed amounts of money that I couldn’t service. So I took that decision. I love the land and I hated the day I drove away but I took that decision for business reasons. I know that one day I could turn around and do other things... You only get once chance in life so that was the deal and I had to take it (Male beef producer, CQ, late 30s, 1996).

Farmers are made to confront their own beliefs and values, facing the fact that more hard work will not rescue their farms (Bryant, 1992). However, reflecting on the decision to stay on the property, very often because of a sense of ‘stewardship’ for the next generation, rather than taking the option of sell, also has unforeseen consequences.

When I first moved up there, there were many other families around on other properties, and we used to share a lot of things. I had friends up the road. These people are now selling up and leaving and I am there by myself - even my sister-in-law has sold up. You know you just can’t leave, you just can’t sell the property. You feel that you owe something to the children, you are doing it for the children (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

8.3 Community

Community is also an important aspect of rural tradition (see also Stehlik et al, 1996b). It is both threatened and threatening in times of economic difficulty in agriculture. As we discuss in more detail in the next chapter, the local community is a prime source of social integration in rural life. Rural community members can share a strong sense of belonging and collective interest, fostered by structural features such as interests in property and cultural attributes such as kinship. However there continues to be a lack of understanding as to the complexities within and between communities that are exemplified in the policies being developed to ‘cope’ with the drought crisis (see Stehlik et al, 1996b). One consequence of this tendency to vagueness can be observed in the many fallacious assumptions within policy that are often made about communities - for example, that communities, by definition (ie. as normatively good) enshrine certain shared values - another is that communities have shared interests and therefore cooperation within such communities is natural and usual. Often what the rhetoric which is associated with the politisisation of 'community' actually means however, is a cut back of government services and leaving it 'up to the family' (see for example, Cheers, 1994).
Community ties can be important to rural people's mental well being (O'Brien et al., 1994). As people struggle to maintain their farms environmentally as well as financially, the energy they can devote to their communities must be diminished (Stone, 1992). Resources become precious - not just the financial resources such as the petrol needed to travel distances to community events - but the emotional resources which enable individuals to continue in the face of deepening anxieties. There is a sense where individuals feel ‘guilty’ about enjoying themselves. However, as community populations decline, the emotional energy needed to keep fragmenting groups together declines even further. Important though it is to social support in rural life, there are cultural limits to community. Individualism, independence and privacy counter collective sentiment (Wright and Rosenblatt, 1988). Farming tradition emphasises the value of hard work, and promises that it will bring success. The corollary is that failure implies lack of hard work: failure to live up to family and community ideals. Failure can be shameful for those whose farms are threatened and embarrassing for other community members. Rural communities can and do support their members but they can also attach stigma to events which offend traditional values.

8.4 ‘Managing’ the crisis
As we discuss further in the next chapter the image of isolation under financial threat offers a strong contrast with the common image of mutual support when rural communities are under natural threat (as depicted with regard to bushfires by Poiner, 1990). Unlike financial failure which could be seen to come from mistakes or insufficient hard work, there can be no stigma attached to defeat by random natural events. In this section of the paper, we briefly review other studies undertaken in Australian and in the United States primarily focused at ‘coping’ with crisis and interweave supporting or contrasting findings in our own project, particularly drawing on our case studies6. The structural conditions over which farm people have negligible control, have created a complex situation confronting farm families as they contend with the vagaries of climatic variability, the international agricultural economy, and with their own beliefs and values.

8.4.1 Health: The drought produces for many farmers a financial crisis which, in turn, creates a stressful environment for all those living in rural communities. Stress is an important component of the more personal-level situational conditions. It has to do with attempting to keep the farm family intact - and the animals, crops and soils in good health - while at the same time gaining sufficient income to keep the property economically viable. King depicts a typical situation arising from drought and its connection to potential suicide:

Land degradation through drought carries with it the hidden costs of damage to the social structure of farming communities. Farmers become depressed, develop low self-esteem and feelings of failure. They may feel that they have lost the family heritage in the land and may experience loss of social status and reduced income. This accumulation of loss and their part in it, in having to destroy their own livelihood through the slaughter of their animals, is devastating (1994:3).

6 As stated elsewhere, all names are pseudonyms.
When asked, none of our case study respondents identified feelings of depression and contemplation of suicide, but many did admit to feelings of ‘stress’ and ‘moderate health problems’, particularly those who were considering leaving:

I have never worried more...[I] wake up at two in the morning and wonder what the heck I am gong to do next...You have got a knot in your tummy all the time wondering whether the payments are going to be there - and whether you are going to make it and get over the next hill. Continually climbing over the next hill. You get over that one and there is another to climb (Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

Feeling low. I know some people who have been hospitalised for depression and I'd say the drought has a lot to do with it. There is a lot of things this drought can be blamed for. The people you worry about - you can't go up to them and say 'look I think you are suffering from depression and you should do something about it' because human nature tells me that they will say just 'mind your own business' (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996)

Those who were determined to stay, also experienced health concerns. One of our case study respondents (aged late 50s) admitted to ‘a few stomach upsets and things like that. A bit of nervousness’ associated with ‘selling sheep [or finding] pumps stuck with sheep’. He did see ‘depression’ evident in his sons and his wife, particularly ‘when she can’t spend money on the house’. His wife, however, tells another story.

He even admits that he gets headaches all the time now and he never used to. He lies awake worrying. You can virtually hear him working out where he is going to put the sheep. He does a lot of worrying.

Her own anxiety comes from the financial side ‘We keep thinking if it doesn’t rain! We are always saying we’d like the bank balance in the black instead of the red!’

While stress is primarily associated with financial difficulty, the connection is not necessarily direct. As Armstrong and Schulman (1990) note, perceptions of what is at stake, self-esteem and perceived control are significant mediating factors. The evidence obtained by Gray et al., (1993) supports the significance attached to perception of the stakes and perceived control and reveals the significance of off-farm work for family relationships and stress. Gray and Lawrence (1996) have established that financial conditions, the perceived stakes, the combination of on-farm and off-farm obligations and the general frustrations of farm life are the significant predictors of stress. The predictors of stress differ between men and women, gender relations and their attachment to farming as a way of life being stronger for women while youth is a stronger predictor for men.

8.4.2 Off-farm labour: Gray and Lawrence (1996) focus particularly on the taking of off-farm work by family members and conclude that it can precipitate intra-family conflict, not merely through increased demands on members' time, but as roles and expectations are questioned and traditional values are challenged. Given that a good deal of off-farm work occurs at times of drought, the extent of intra-family conflict, and hence stress, is an inevitable outcome.

In their earlier study (1992/3) conducted in New South Wales Gray and Lawrence (1996) found that many chose the option of working off the farm, especially when

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2 Studies conducted in the United States reveal a similar picture.
drought severely limited the income available from the property. Our larger study found that in the example of the case study respondents, more men in the Riverina (9 part-time) were able to undertake part-time off-farm labour than in Queensland (1 part-time; 3 full time). Off farm labour appeared to be equally divided between the women in CQ (5 full time; 1 part-time) and the Riverina (5 part-time). However, for many of the producers we spoke to in 1996, working off-farm was not an option for a number of inter-related reasons: the decline in available itinerant labour; the need to nurture diminishing resources through the use of family labour rather than paid labour; the distance to any available paid employment and the decline in available employment opportunities as small businesses, rural schools and government funding cut-backs began to impact on their region. Only one male producer in New South Wales, and none in Queensland were undertaking any form of ‘off-farm’ labour, while none of the women interviewed in either region were doing so.

8.4.3 Future planning: Farming is a challenging and dangerous occupation in which many things can and do go wrong, leading to stressful situations. Disasters such as fire, flood and drought are unambiguously stressful, but so too can be many other events, such as, for example disease outbreaks\(^8\) and even failed machinery. Difficulties in adjustment may be experienced by family members to such events. Additionally, life transitions such as marriage and retirement bring complex changes in terms of farm ownership and management which influence family relationships. As our case studies show, while the majority of our respondents saw themselves living ‘indefinitely’ on their properties, not all of them believed that their children would continue to farm after their deaths. In one of the more recent New South Wales focus groups, the male producers were able to identify a number of neighbouring properties where none of the children were planning to take up the property after their parents’ retirement.

8.4.5 Staying or going?: During a crisis such as drought, many farmers will consider selling their properties - a prospect which compounds the stress already experienced by farm families. Joslin and Rosmann (1986) (cited in Murray and Keller (1991:224)) describe five stages of adaptation to the loss of private property, derived from experience of mental health practice in the United States:

- anticipation and often denial;
- realisation that foreclosure is inevitable - desperation;
- foreclosure period - potential suicide
- acceptance and resignation
- acceptance with new meaning\(^9\).

\(^8\) For example, in the western rangelands, the rabbit plague is a constant and additional stressor.

\(^9\) Trautwein (1991), an Australian minister of religion involved in rural counselling services, likened losing the farm to a death in family, and like being diagnosed as having terminal illness. He saw six stages: (1) denial, don’t want to know, don’t want to share - questioning their own abilities;(2) reflection on the past and seeing themselves as failures - not wanting to let others see inside their dilemma;( 3) people isolating themselves from family and friends - feeling unable to trust their own judgement while seeing past mistakes - depression; (4) blaming banks, the government, themselves - risk of drinking and domestic violence; (5) humiliation before a bank - having to go to it whenever wanting to do something on the farm; (6)deep personal sense of loss when the farm is sold.
Depression, anger, worry and feelings of loss of control and self-esteem were reported by respondents to the survey by Gray et al., (1993), with depression being the most commonly reported feeling after particularly difficult events such as price falls or threats from banks. Here our case study respondents provided some interesting views based on their experience of ‘sticking it out’. Some respondents wanted to give up farming, but by far the majority reported a strong determination to continue. When asked who they found provided them with good support outside the family during this time, some male producers named their bank managers, stock and station agents and accountants. These alliances in times of stress were seen as a positive alternative to decisions to leave the property. When the decision is made to sell the property, the difference in stress is palpable for some:

It is just stress, you know, and people said when we moved to town, ‘oh God, you look ten years younger’. I think it is just stress, yeah. And just run down and don’t have holidays and you are just talking to the same people all the time and all you are talking about is the drought (Former female beef producer, CQ,1996).

The availability of counselling was a topic of discussion. For some the opportunity to have ‘some one to talk to’ was vital:

I think that we have just absolutely proved the point of just how vital [the] rural counselling service is in this community, and originally they were only set up for a three year program and that was going to be the end of them. To me, now, the rural counselling service in this community is just as important or more important ... it should be part of the infrastructure of our community, and funded to meet the needs of servicing isolated areas (Female sheep/wheat producer, 1996).

However, there was an alternative viewpoint

I think people on the land are generally, in times of crises or droughts are usually stressed...(but)... stress counsellors are the last thing most of us need. It is just another bureaucracy brewing up. Most people in the bush are resilient, independent and they want something tangible. There would be an odd case I suppose where counselling may help but they wouldn’t have got to that stage if they had some other (financial) assistance available before they got so emotional (Male beef producer, CQ,1996).

**8.4.6 Intergenerational issues:** While Rosenblatt and Keller (1983) found evidence of blaming among family members in their United States study, this has not been our experience. There is some interesting discussion in our interviews about the intergenerational roles between fathers and sons in times of crisis, but as the case study respondents describe, all named various family members as being the most important individuals who gave them support in difficult times and many named only family members as supports. Gray et al. (1993) found evidence of marital conflict exacerbated by financial stress, but blame was more often directed towards 'the government'. Again, our interviews found some differing views, as for many of the producers the availability of government support was the difference between staying and leaving. In the CQ interviews, we found 20 of the 30 properties under discussion were receiving some form RAS assistance; in the Riverina 5 were with two others having applied. In the nine case study respondents, only two families were receiving any form of government assistance. This is discussed again further below.
Boylan (1990:22) found that 'some families are seen to close off all their interactions with their community' and Farmer (1986) discusses a similar phenomenon in the United States. Gray et al. (1993) offer some evidence of such withdrawal, but also found people getting together with others and particularly that women were more likely than men to adopt personal contact-focused strategies. In our study we were particularly interested in the relationships which enabled support and encouragement to the producers in hard times. Overwhelmingly, our respondents named ‘family’ both extended and intimate family, as the primary support.

In conclusion, there is evidence that drought is one of those factors which can cause significant stress and consequent deterioration in health and family relations among farm families. We should make the very obvious point here that despite the arguments that farmers overstock and take risks on the basis of an expectation that the government will bail them out, that drought is a very serious matter for farm families. Health and relationship problems have obvious personal implications, but they may also affect the family’s capacity to manage for drought, among other issues that they have to cope with.
Findings: The Impact on Communities

I haven't got any neighbours, they are all gone. Well, they are people I don't know, put it that way. The people that my neighbours, that I knew, are all gone. So they are all new people and they are big companies. Both sides of us are well, two properties, [the] Japanese have bought and they are just run by managers. And they are not ... people ... they are just companies (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

9.1 Communities in crisis

It is not surprising that, at the time of writing, regional and rural Australia can be considered under increasing threat as the impacts of recessions, droughts and declining commodity prices are pressing heavily on communities. In this context, drought can be seen as a defining event which is ‘shared’ across communities and regions and even the states of the Commonwealth. During the 1990s, people living in rural communities have watched, often helplessly, as inexorably change comes. The dichotomy between urban and rural is not just confined to the larger eastern cities and the hinterland, it is also evident within what we would term rural communities. The drought, the falling commodity prices, the dramatic social changes have also challenged the essential mythology about the notion of ‘community’ in the ‘bush’.

This chapter explores the impact of drought and the rural crisis on rural communities, not just those people engaged in direct agriculture but the wider ‘ripple’ effect on everyone who lives beyond the ‘eastern seaboard’. The discussion focuses on three social ‘problems’ which can only be addressed at the community level - sustainability, community support (eg counselling) and social cohesion. As we discuss, there are factors which promote cohesion and those which promote division. Communities are being divided by restructuring in general. The factors which relate to drought and the impact of drought make the prospects for action at the community level in response to drought rather weak.

9.2 Community sustainability in times of crisis

9.2.1 Understanding the context: The emerging pattern of rural Australia is one of continued disadvantage, with lack of access to services and lifestyle choices, often cited as the major contributors to quality of life. Recent research confirms that the consequences of structural and profound community changes can be characterised through:

- a decline in population
- lower incomes for sections of the remaining population
- lower standards of living
• fewer community services, poorer service delivery
• lower levels of social participation and social integration
• decreased retail trade and fewer retail outlets
• environmental pollution
• more rigid class structure
• more unemployment (Lobao, 1990 cited in Lawrence, 1995: 8)

A number of recent reports identify the disadvantage Australians living in small communities face. Lawrence (1995:6) identifies that of the ‘37 economically poorest electorates in Australia, some 33 are located in rural regions’ - where unemployment (and underemployment) is higher, where general health standards are poor, and where rural populations ‘have above-average rates of premature mortality and death through heart disease, cancer, suicide and tuberculosis’. Some statistics of out-migration (either through choice or necessity) from the rural heartland of Australia are instructive. Australia has 849 shires and municipalities, and in 1990/1991 some 240 of them lost population, 88 per cent of these being in rural areas (Cribb, 1994:12). Reflecting on the impact in the past decade we can see the total overall number of farms has declined, the rural workforce is diminished and the ‘domino effect of collapsing services [to rural areas] ... has brought many small communities to the brink of extinction (1994:13). The above might lead to a consideration of the need to replace the present economic system with one which is more caring, more democratic and less geographically polarised. A radical change in social consciousness does not, however, appear to be likely. What might be predicted, however, is that in times of continued economic crises, new and somewhat bold economic initiatives may be required to stem social foment. The result may be a different economic trajectory for rural/remote areas.

One potentially dynamic means of addressing the challenge facing communities in rural/remote regions is to consider broadening the meaning of sustainability. Within the advanced societies there is, for example, an urgent need to solve the growing problem of environmental degradation (see Vanclay and Lawrence, 1995). Governments - including those in Australia - have moved to encourage ecologically sustainable development including new environmentally sensitive ways of using land and water resources. It is being recognised that some agricultural practices need modification, while others must be abandoned. Using a criterion of sustainability, it has been suggested that quite dramatic changes might occur. The need to place environmental issues on the same plane as productivity and efficiency has led to a fundamental questioning of the ‘productivist’ approach in resource use, and with it an appreciation that the negative manifestations of high tech agriculture (such as continued environmental degradation, larger farms, declining farm numbers and country town contraction) have been associated with the single-minded pursuit of productivity/efficiency goals in agriculture.

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10 For example, one such on poverty in Queensland pointed to the rising economic polarisation between urban/rural and coastal/hinterland communities (Thornthwaite et al, 1995).
The problem is that, up until the present, the sustainability debate has been limited to bio-technical discussions relating to agricultural and other production systems (Vanclay and Lawrence, 1995). It is only in relatively recent times that social scientists have suggested that sustainable production should be linked to sustainable community development (Agriculture and Rural Restructuring Group, 1989; Lawrence, 1990a; Lowe and Murdoch, 1993). This argument suggests that it is both farm and non-farm social groups which ‘contribute to the social fabric of the countryside’ (Lowe and Murdoch, 1993) and that it is pointless attempting to ‘correct’ the problems of agriculture independently of the processes which underlie economic and social development in the countryside. As Gray (1994) has suggested, there is little evidence to suggest that local economic regeneration will be possible within or following the current period of rural restructuring: it is more likely that, at least in terms of economic matters, communities may lose what little autonomy they possess to transnational interests.

9.2.2 Developing sustainable communities: It is unfortunate that policymakers can give priority to environmental issues while seemingly overlooking the people whose livelihood and culture will be affected by future changes in farming. This is not to suggest that those wanting social improvements should ignore ecologically sustainable development. In very general terms it would seem that the move to a more sustainable system of water and land use will act greatly to advantage the people of rural/remote Australia. First, and most obviously, the resource base will remain intact and so provide a stable basis for continued production; second, the abandoning of environmentally harmful practices will ultimately mean the removal of chemicals from the system. Third, farmers should save on inputs, thus lowering costs of production, and increase international competitiveness (this will help them to remain in agriculture); fourth, with ‘cleaner’ food as one outcome new markets may open up both domestically and abroad; fifth, some of the new sustainable practices are likely to be labour intensive (and knowledge intensive) which may actually swell numbers involved in, or servicing, agriculture and so provide new vitality to regional communities; and sixth, in those areas deemed unsuitable for existing forms of agriculture, governments may assist those remaining to manage resources on behalf of the public, encouraging the return of degraded environments to their former (natural) state.

Agricultural sustainability might help to address population decline in farming as well as in the industries servicing agriculture, thus enhancing rural community viability, for example, the rural aged may no longer find themselves in regions where services are in decline (Stehlik and Lawrence, 1996). If rural towns become more attractive to rural settlers who can take advantage of new work options in the area of environmental protection, eco-tourism, aged care and other service industries, the incomes of these new settlers are likely to provide an economic multiplier in the town. As Lowe and Murdoch (1993) and Stilwell (1993) have argued, employment, housing, transport and resource consumption - and the connections between them - are some of the key policy issues in relation to social reproduction of the countryside.

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11 Just as in Europe (see Commins, 1990) farmers may come to see themselves, and be seen by the state, as caretakers of wilderness areas, guides for visitors to the outback, or as park rangers. Again, this represents new work options in rural areas.
New cultural and political institutions may have to emerge to address previous market failures and provide much needed coordination. The general inability of local governments to achieve something new (to move beyond limitations of finance and imagination) is well understood - as is the desirability of encouraging new forms of cooperation at the sub state (regional) level (see Kelty, 1993; Stilwell, 1993). In Australia, there is a very limited local basis for the articulation of ideas such as those proposed in the Kelty Report, for regional coordination of economic development. Local government has been generally unresponsive to moves to join regional initiatives, fearing that their own autonomy might be undermined in the process (see Lawrence, 1987).

Unlike suggestions of writers who would wish to see the problems of the rural/remote communities considered outside the context of the present system of economic production and consumption, the approach of ‘sustainable community development’ recognises that the future fate of all rural citizens rests with an alteration to the trajectory of both agriculture and of the communities to which it is linked. Our study supports the views of Shaffer (1994: 268) who believes sustainable communities ‘possess a political economy and other social constructs that permit the orderly and efficient maintenance and use of community resources and facilities’ and which facilitate community interaction with wider social and economic processes. Shaffer has identified four micro-level characteristics of those communities which are economically viable and socially sustainable:

- there is general concern about (and some dissatisfaction with existing proposals to deal with) issues facing the community;
- there is a positive approach to innovation and local achievement;
- there is a good deal of community discussion;
- there is past evidence of implementation of community decisions. Such communities are anxious to confront the factors which place a fetter upon development: they appear to believe (whether correctly or otherwise) that they control their own destinies (Shaffer, 1994:268).

Sustainable communities are those which, in Shaffer’s terms, ‘bring in money, keep money re-circulating, use resources more effectively, find new uses for resources, find new resources, change rules of the game, act smarter, (and) get lucky’ (Shaffer, 1994: 268-269). Yet, he is fully aware that what local communities do is contingent upon external factors, that those external factors relate to the dynamics of capitalism, and that capitalism has had a polarising effect on social and economic space.

9.2.3 The limitations and challenges of sustainability: The experience of the drought identified the urgency of the need to confront the causes of economic inequality within poorly regulated and largely unplanned economic climate. For Stilwell, what must be discussed is the development of

\[12\] And Australia, unlike the U.S., does not have people called ‘community developers’ whose role is to identify new ways for resources to be mobilised at the local level.
... an integrated set of fiscal, monetary, trade and industry development policies... Particularly important in the economic conditions of the 1990s are interventionist regionally targeted industry policies and a more expansionary and regionally targeted fiscal policy. These can generate a more diversified, balanced economic structure which is less vulnerable to the volatility of the international economy. The pursuit of these policies can also contribute to creating more diversified industrial bases for urban and regional economies. This diversification would help to alleviate problems associated with the concentration of capital and economic dependence on a small number of large corporate enterprises (1993: 261-262).

While Stilwell is aware of the difficulties in attempting to ‘sell’ regionally-based, radical, interventionist options to address the problems of capitalism, he is nevertheless convinced that this will be necessary for the achievement of ecologically sustainable development. We might add that this is likely to be necessary, as well, for the achievement of sustainable rural development and for social justice for disenfranchised groups - like for example, the rural elderly - who are innocent victims of the polarising effects of current economic development within capitalism (Stehlik and Lawrence, 1996).

In the regions we have researched, there are a number of marginally viable properties which have been heavily mortgaged. It appears inevitable that, despite any future lifting of drought declarations and a return to ‘normal’ seasons, a number of families will be forced to sell and leave their communities. This will have a direct impact on the quality of life, not only of those families who have to leave, but also the district they leave behind. The drought has changed the way in which the land is managed and the structure of employment. Our study has shown that those producers who have left their in order to undertake off farm work are usually younger and therefore more able to find alternative employment. Our study has also identified those producers who have installed managers on their properties and are actually now living in urban centres. The evidence has confirmed that women are working off farm and, in many cases, provide much needed additional family income. Again, those women who are able to take this option are usually younger, and more likely to have post-secondary qualifications.

One affect of this major social change is that rural Australia no longer supports as many families (for example in Central Queensland the number of itinerant workers has decreased markedly) and, as a consequence, the concept of ‘community’ can be seen as under threat. In this sense ‘sustainability’ becomes rhetoric rather than a reality. Such services (both public and private) as are being provided become increasingly marginal and under threat. As a result, communities are not economically or socially enriched by the in-migration of ‘new people’. Instead, people have either left the district or are surviving with the support of social security income payments or on overdrafts.

9.2.4 Surviving in ‘unsustainable’ communities: When we asked our respondents to consider ‘life after the drought’ - many people felt it difficult to do so. It seems that with the drought affecting everyone, most people live from day to day rather than planning or thinking about the future. Most people tell us that their

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13 In this context, one of our respondents spoke of whole houses ‘disappearing’ as families left properties and moved to the coast.
contacts within their communities are diminishing, and their networks are becoming more tenuous. There is a sense where families are retreating within themselves, rather than connecting with other families.

Within the framework of the communities discussed above what would some of the dimensions of quality of life entail? Our experience within this project is that the responses are as varied as the individuals. Concepts such as autonomy, choice and the ability to control one’s own time and day come forward as crucial aspects to well being and quality of life. However, ‘community’ in its idealistic and mythic sense, as well as a practical one, is essential to an appreciation of the concept of wellbeing. Those we interview discuss the way in which their relationship to the land is important to them and to their families, and the way in which they feel responsible for it, a sense of stewardship with it. Watching the land change, and slowly die is extremely painful for many - some women we interviewed, for example, talked about the way in which the death of trees on their land affected them, and the changes in fauna - fewer animals, more birds - came to signal a change in environment. For some women, the death of their gardens, despite all the effort expended to upkeep them, became a symbolic ‘ending’ of everything they had worked so hard to maintain.

9.3 Responses and community support

9.3.1 Human service responses to crisis: The future viability of such communities does rest on the capacity of that community to regenerate itself once the crisis has passed. As Ling points out, such a capacity is linked to:

... their ability to maintain, enhance and develop key services and opportunities ... not only economic or functional ... but also a range of social and cultural benefits which foster a sense of community and a positive attitude to its continuation (1994: 8).

Is the only way that communities can maintain their sense of ‘rurality’ and ‘otherness’ in times of crisis by relying on the state? Lawrence and Share (1993) point out the

... very conception of the causes of and solutions to rural problems is said to be distorted by what has been referred to as ‘urbo-centrism’ - the hegemonic nature of the attitudes, assumptions and beliefs of urban-based decision makers. In practice, urbo-centricity ensures that when a rural problem is identified it will invariably be addressed by the implementation of well-tested urban programs (1993:7).

Such a response can be observed in microcosm in Queensland where the human service response has been mobilised as a result of the ongoing drought crisis, it has tended towards the haphazard and uncoordinated. As a result, community development workers in rural areas face a serious problem - not only maintaining existing levels of services but ensuring that the population drain away from rural areas is stopped if communities are going to survive. The workers’ dilemma stems from needing to maintain services to individuals while at the same time being essentially powerless to halt the diminution of services to communities. There is also the underlying threat to their own careers - perhaps there will be no community left to develop?
A brief outline of the state government’s response to the crisis in Queensland is informative. Following a pilot project undertaken by Lifeline (Darling Downs) in 1992, the Rural Support Worker Scheme was created as a response by the Queensland Government to the rural crisis and particularly the continuation of the drought. In June 1993, six 'drought workers' attached to existing community organisations were appointed in Charleville, Goondiwindi, Moranbah, Roma, Dalby and the Central Highlands (Middlemount). These workers’ primary aim was to ‘distribute cash to farm families’ but also to network with other drought initiatives and to provide ‘emotional support’. Their secondary aim was to ‘assist the community to develop long term responses to the current (ie drought) situation’ (DPI Drought Bulletin, June 7 1993, No. 3: 9).

In other words, the drought assistance personnel were always seen as having three roles - income support provision, counselling, and community development. The Scheme was originally funded for a period of six months and seen directly as a crisis intervention and by the end of the first six months of the Scheme, the program had distributed some $250,000 to farm families in crisis, and cars had been provided to the drought support workers to assist them to travel to families. The primary role became crisis intervention and income support and as the drought continued, in the 1994 State Budget the Rural Communities Policy Package announced an extension of the scheme to further areas, ongoing funding for six 'cross program' schemes and new monies to establish five multipurpose services in small isolated townships (Drought Bulletin, No. 5, August 1994). This extended the drought support program to 19 services by October 1994 all of which were staffed by the following May 1995 (Drought Bulletin, No. 8, May 1995), including one located in the Duaringa Shire. In the 1995 Budget, the responsibility for the Rural Support Worker program moved from the Office of Rural Communities to the (now) Department of Family, Youth and Community Care within the Family Services program and in 1995, that Department estimated that $13 million reached 277 services in rural and remote areas (DFSAIA, 1995).

9.3.2 The impact of such responses: These responses - which are based on urban models of service delivery, and predicated on both the availability of other human services and on the acceptance by the community of the intrusion associated with ‘charity’ - have had a mixed response from those individuals affected by the drought. For many, the concept of accepting subsidies - however much they may be needed - is anathema, it goes against deeply held beliefs of autonomy and choice which underpin a concept of ‘quality of life’. Subsidies come at a price. Our study has identified that they may require changes to farm management practice or they may entail the need to change family practices (such as shopping in the supermarket designated on the vouchers provided).

Within the community, it quickly becomes common knowledge who is receiving subsidies, who is entitled but has rejected them, and who is accepting them but is perceived as ‘not needing them’ - an event which underpins community decline.

An early sign of community disharmony in the Central Queensland region emerged when the first donations of stock feed arrived in the district. People whose debt levels were low or non-existent were seen by others to be accepting such donations. In addition, these responses bring with them ‘urbo-centric’ notions of ‘welfarism’,
particularly notions of the ‘deserving and undeserving poor’. This directly challenges what many of those we interviewed say is the essential nature of living in ‘the bush’ - being autonomous, not being beholden to anyone, and having the capacity to make personal choices. We would also suggest that where subsidies are linked to factors considered ‘rural’ - such as the diesel fuel rebate or stock feed, they are accepted willingly. However, where they are linked to ‘charity’ often because the agencies delivering the services are linked to religious organisations and take the shape of income support or pensions - they are rejected or accepted with great reluctance.

9.4 Social cohesion

The interviews identified areas of cohesion as well as division - support from families as well as support from communities. Focus group discussions carried out western rangelands of N.S.W., obtained reports of people coming together to talk over their problems during periods of drought-induced stress. In response to a question about conversations with a neighbour, a farm woman replied: 'Oh yes, we all have a good old yak. We see them regularly because they are only a few miles down the road and they bring their kiddies'. A member of a rural counselling service management committee revealed a common strength derived from community interaction, observing that '[drought] strengthens the community ties within the area. I mean if just one property was being drought-affected and missing out on rain, you'd just about roll up and wither away but when you can ring up a neighbour and have a laugh and say, well, we only got the same amount of rainfall.' A stock and station agent interjected: 'It brings people together', followed by an expression of agreement from the first speaker. The potential for a coming-together based on sentiment in the form of mutual sympathy and support is apparent.

Three features of drought make for a social response which fosters social cohesion. When drought is seen as a natural disaster, those who are affected by it may perceive a common threat and respond with communion: social bonding based on sentiment prompting collective action to combat the threat. Drought has been presented by the Australian media as a threat to be combated and an ingredient in the formation of rural identity, the second factor. The third factor is more structural: an identity of material interests perceived by disparate groups who nevertheless see themselves as sharing an interest in what drought places in jeopardy.

9.4.1 Cohesion and communion: As a natural disaster, drought offers a threat which prompts unusual feelings of belonging. This phenomenon is most often analysed at the local level. The concept of communion has not yet been applied to analysis of local responses to drought, perhaps because the threat of drought is not visible in terms of a single event attributable to a single and identifiable force against which sentiment might be mobilised. Where drought has persisted over many years it may have become a norm rather than an object of social mobilisation, and there may be insufficient people remaining in a community after multiple farm business failures to provide the critical mass for social action.

9.4.2 Identity and interests: While it is not difficult to accept that media images of drought-stricken and struggling farmers are likely to have boosted their capacity to lobby for assistance, it is hard to accept that the farmers create the media depictions to serve their own ends, especially as their own organisations have moved away from
presenting drought as a strictly natural disaster toward endorsing the current government approach (Lawrence et al., 1996b). Nevertheless there are feasible avenues through which the cultural construction of drought produces and reproduces sources of identity and potentially social bonding.

Both identity and communion may be based on communities of interests, in the manner raised by Hall et al. (1984) in terms of class. Class, however, is a notoriously problematic concept to apply to rural communities unless one adopts a purely descriptive stratification approach (see Lawrence, 1986). Questions related to rural communities of interest have effectively been raised, however, through analysis of the relationships between townspeople and farmers. This relationship has often been seen as one of mutual interdependence, with towns being dependent not just on agriculture but on the small family-based system of agriculture which remains typical though not universal in Australia.

9.5 Social division

For each of the factors by which drought may promote social cohesion, there is a counterpart acting to promote division. While communion brings people together, as the structures which stratify their social relationships lose significance and are forgotten amid perception of a common threat, the constraints imposed by drought may render normal patterns of social interaction problematic with consequent diminution of community relations. Moreover, the rationalisation of the avenues through which they can combat drought introduces new elements of bureaucratisation into their social relationships. While rural tradition draws on symbols of drought which are respected and responded to, elements of cultural differentiation can also be found within that same tradition. Interpretations of the events and symbols of drought will not necessarily be universal. Structural differentiation, within farm communities but more especially between farm and town communities, raises questions about the commonality of interests.

9.5.1 Tensions between ‘town’ and ‘country’: Policies like those which see drought impacts as part of structural adjustment: a deliberate process of increasing farm size as smaller producers leave agriculture, pose a threat to both town and farm people. The assumption of such policies is that ‘community’ still exists, whereas one male cattle producer, reflecting on the changes in his community said:

The population [has] dropped dramatically. There have been not only people that have gone off properties, employees I'm talking about, but some of the houses have moved because they can see because they won't employ a man again. Complete houses have been moved and moved into town. So people won't come back to this area ... we won't get the services out here because there will be less children and less everything you see. New people have come into the area and we haven't really got the social contact with them that we had with the previous people [they are] different sort of people, they don't socialise ...

A debate about more complex aspects of this relationship has been carried on since the late 1940s over the relationship between farm structure and local town economies. The evidence indicates that town economies fare better where their business hinterlands consist of small family-operated farms than where larger corporate farms dominate (Carlin and Saupe, 1993). From an empirical test in Chile, Young (1994) concluded that
the relationship holds for quality of life factors as well as economic effects. As drought is likely to have greater impact on the viability of small farms where owners lack the backing of large corporate resources, it may bring change in farm structure: increasing the dominance of large producers at the expense of family farmers. In this way, town-dwellers and family farmers share an interest in maintenance of the small farm system and a common threat from both climate and government. In Central Queensland, one woman beef producer discussed the impact of the drought on the relationship between her own local small town and those farm families in the neighbourhood and the way in which the drought tends to force people into their own private worlds, rather than supporting and helping each other:

... there is a big division between the town people and the country people ... [Small town name] people are the town people. Everyone has been flat out with their own interests at home, with feeding cattle, helping their husbands, schooling their children, summer school, distance ed[ucation]. I don't think anyone has had time to worry. They are all trying to keep themselves floating without worrying about anyone down the road.

Respondents to our study confirmed that when farm incomes are reduced by drought, the businesses patronised by farm families are likely to suffer. In one focus group in New South Wales, a business proprietor stated: 'The shops are pretty affected ... It's all tied into the weather'. A farmer commented: 'The people who own businesses in town are the first ones to say that they've been feeling it; after we feel it, they feel it.' Another added: 'They are supplying our needs and if the people on the land can't afford to buy...' The coincidence of interests is generally accepted. One man from this district identified the chronological disparities between ‘town’ and ‘country’ -

I think the shop owners in town have helped one another and supported one another because they really do feel the effects after we do ... sometimes I don't think the town community completely understand the effects of drought until it hits them, which is quite a while after we are feeling the effects [when] it hits the business in town ...

9.5.2 Loss of support networks: For many families, the decline in their social networks is the greatest challenge the drought has provoked. In addition, and importantly, the out-migration is having a direct effect on the cohesion of rural communities. For women particularly, as well as for men and children, the networks that were an accepted component of the ‘rural lifestyle’ are fast disappearing. One Central Queensland woman cattle producer sadly reflected that the ‘worst’ impact of the drought was that ‘we have lost all our good neighbours - we have lost neighbours on both sides. They were not only neighbours but were [our] friends’. Drought places increasing demands on family labour when in other circumstances there would be time and energy for social events. Moreover, low incomes make it difficult to hire labour. The impact of drought combined with deteriorating returns from farming is illustrated by the comment of a farmer in focus group, from a male perspective at least:

Everyone in the community would get in their trucks and drive to ... and play cricket and they'd drink beer all the way back and it would go on for a couple of days. They'd work very hard and they would work until the job was done and then they would party... Everyone [now] is working seven days a week and if you are not working seven days a week you get to about Saturday or Sunday and you are so
jolly tired that you just go and have a sleep. The social interaction is just not happening.

No substantial study has analysed this issue, however. In an earlier study, Gray et al. (1993) found that leaving organisations was only a minor effect of farmers' coping with economic circumstances.

9.5.3 The rejection of a 'bureaucratisation' of drought: As we discussed earlier drought policies and associated relief programs are administered by state and Federal governments. They are based, however, on considerable input from local communities. The provision of drought relief is based on assessment of the severity of conditions made, for example in New South Wales, by Rural Lands Protection Boards. These are local organisations funded largely by levies on farmers and administered by farmer representatives with the assistance of agricultural experts such as veterinary officers. In N.S.W., Rural Lands Protection Boards recommend to the Minister for Agriculture, under guidelines, that their areas be, or not be, 'drought declared'. This is a pre-requisite to the granting of state assistance. Farmers have a substantial stake in this recommendation process. To obtain assistance from the Federal Government under the Rural Assistance Scheme, it is necessary for local communities, in consultation with their Rural Lands Protection Boards, to show that they are suffering from exceptional meteorological conditions but are economically viable in the long term, again under guidelines. They are required to put their case to the Rural Assistance Scheme Advisory Council which consists of state and Federal Government representatives and a representative of the peak farmer organisation.

Both declarations and 'exceptional circumstances' decisions are made difficult and potentially controversial by the same issues which make definition of drought complex and contentious. As Daly's (1994) third definition of drought suggests, farms in close proximity to one another could be experiencing very different conditions because of agronomic factors. In the drier areas of Australia where rainfall averages are low, a storm could make a substantial difference to a small number of farms while doing nothing for their neighbours. As a Rural Lands Protection Board member said at a focus group:

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One area might be okay, but this time we've got areas within areas... We [recommended that drought declaration be lifted] and one particular area hadn't had the rain that some of us had had and they got up in arms....
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Bureaucratic procedures based on larger geographic areas find it difficult to accommodate such detail, but the farm families affected may be well aware of their neighbours' experience as well as their own, even if their neighbours live many kilometres away.

Drought assistance decisions are also made potentially inequitable and divisive by the necessity for local communities to put their case when some may have more resources enabling them to do so than others. Expertise in technical aspects may be more accessible for some than others, but so too is the ability to put a case in a way which suits the requirements of bureaucracy. Moreover, it is likely to be necessary to show that rainfall has been unusual by comparing current falls to historical experience based on historical records. The availability of such records can depend on many factors, including the diligence with which they have been kept, but also the
continuity of the integrity of farms. Records for some farms which are the products of the subdivision of others may not be available at all. These factors can create circumstances in which some farms obtain assistance while others do not when eligibility is at least contestable.

9.6 Changing roles and places

Social division within communities can be expected to worsen under the influence of current drought policy and its underlying philosophy. Rural communities, particularly those defined to include farm and town populations, contain the seeds of both cohesion and division. These factors lie in an uneasy tension. When drought ceases to contribute to the bases of cohesion, those factors making for division will be relatively strengthened. When drought feeds the bases of division, conflict is a likely outcome. The drought experience has shown a transition of power within communities - where once the power resided within the agrarian based communities, now it has shifted to those centres focussed on mining (see Stehlik et al 1996b). Cultural differentiation and structural relationships within groups in rural Australia is changing (Gray et al 1996), as the traditional hierarchy of graziers, farmers and townspeople is being redefined through impact of out-migration of particularly itinerant employees, diminution of properties in the selling off of farms, and the changing roles of women. In addition, those rural families who are specifically undertaking agricultural pursuits, view such in-migration with ambivalence, particularly (and understandably) the transition of power to those with the economic resources.

The seeds of potential conflict do not mean, however, that social bonds will break down and mutual support disintegrate. The bases of communion, in terms of propinquity and the bonds of family and kinship, may suffer when practices such as social events which provided expression of them are no longer possible. But the bases of kinship and propinquity will remain. Whether communion will so easily arise from them, however, is questionable. Over a long period of drought, as community populations decline and their economic and social resources deteriorate, there may be little capacity left for social activity.

Such questions arise most clearly when the potential impact of changes in definition of drought are considered alongside the ramifications of recent changes in drought policies. If drought ceases to be seen as an enemy to be fought and comes to be seen as something more manageable and expected, through which good farmers apply their skills and cope well while other farmers fail, the universal identity which farmers can claim as battlers against the meteorological foe will be lost. Those who survive may be seen as doing a good job, but suffering unduly from drought would be seen as the farmers' fault. Rather than a victim, the failing farmers come to be seen as incompetent. Competent farmers who appear likely to remain viable will be supported, while others will effectively be asked to leave their community.

When drought is redefined, the image of mutually supportive families from town and country battling together becomes fragile. Cultural differentiation between town and country will change, not in terms of the basis of the status order, but rather in the weakening of claims to status by formerly highly-ranked individuals.
It can then be seen that producers who are failing through what is seen to be their own mismanagement will find it increasingly difficult to claim that town businesses are dependent on them and hence maintain town-dwellers' deference and support. Those producers who manage drought well feel quite differently about seeking assistance from government compared to those who are suffering. These factors bring division in what would earlier have been united local or regional community attempts to obtain support. This is unfortunate, especially at a time when communities are increasingly being called upon to support themselves and are forced to be their own advocates in the battle for public resources to develop their own sustainable futures.
Findings: The Impact on Changing Lives

We are still living basically the same type of life yet you have more worry. You worry about whether you have to sell off more stock and all this ... It's mainly the stress and worry of all the things you worry about when it's dry. You worry about whether you can keep going if it doesn't rain' (Female sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

Well, [we don’t] entertain anymore. I used to do quite a bit of entertaining and all that sort of thing and people don’t ... [now for over] 10 years. All that sort of business changed. We just don’t have the money to go and do things like that (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

10.1 Gender differences

This study was predicated on the assumption that men and women would experience drought differently. Our methodology (see Chapter 3) details how we collected their narratives. Incorporated in the findings discussed here we identify several themes which emerged from the interviews with women producers. These include: the degree of decision-making; their focus on their children; the role changes expected of them; what they termed their 'inside/outside' experiences; the place of gardens and spirituality in their lives. This chapter draws on interviews - using tables to summarise issues where possible - and explores the way in which health and personal ‘coping’, decision making and intergenerational issues were confronted and managed by both women and men during the drought. This chapter should be read in conjunction with previous chapters and also draws on material gained during the case study interviews.

10.2 Impact on farm life

Our study has identified a strong correlation between maintaining personal health and well being and maintaining property health and well being. Strategies of coping with long periods of drought have affected not only the lives of our respondents but also those of their close and extended families. Slee (1988) notes five features of farm life which make farm people uniquely susceptible to stressful situations: close work relationships in families, blurred roles such as those which arise from off-farm work for women combined with farm and family responsibilities, seasonal variations in work patterns, irregular cash flows and physical isolation. To these we would add farm family and community relationships. Farmer identifies perhaps the most significant feature of this aspect of rural tradition:

[Producers] report an intense bonding with the land, something that is perhaps difficult for nonfarmers to appreciate. The farm represents the collective effort and wisdom of several generations working with a particular plot of land; the wisdom of managing it is part and parcel of the family's identity and its legacy for the future. And connected with this strong sense of landedness is a sense of freedom that comes with being independent operators (Farmer, 1986:57).

Our respondents were often living in what many of us in urban Australia would consider to be straightened circumstances. The study has found that farm families in
times of crisis make decisions to abandon their ‘luxuries’ very early. As the drought continued, decisions had to be taken to make sacrifices, for example, boarding school education for children, social activities, holidays, and other ‘quality of life’ events. Most individual energies are put into the property, with little time is left for ‘luxuries’ even, as one woman beef producer describes, gardening.

We used to have a lovely garden ... he just doesn’t have time to do the garden. He mows the grass when he absolutely must. And we used to spend weekends in the garden, but we never have time for those things any more. They just seem to have gone by the board (Female beef producer, CQ, 1997).

Table shows that the majority of all respondents - both in New South Wales and Queensland - identified that the drought had affected their family income.

Table 8
Effect of drought on family incomes - n = 103

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>% respondents</th>
<th>Qld</th>
<th>NSW</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eliminated it completely</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced it to its lowest point ever</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced it substantially</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced it below average</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had little effect</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Had no effect</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The extent to which people suffer hardship can be indicated by the frequency of their having insufficient money for essentials. Respondents were asked how often they had no money for essentials and were offered a 5 point scale from never through sometimes to very often. Table 9 shows the proportion of respondents who had insufficient money for selected items at least sometimes.

Table 9
Frequency of running out of money for selected items at least sometimes n = 103

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Essential items</th>
<th>Qld</th>
<th>NSW</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuel</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schoolbooks (respondents with children)</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ninety per cent of respondents said that they received support from family both on and off the farm - we discuss this remarkable statistic in detail below. Seventy-two per cent said that they were relying more on family labour. Sixty-seven per cent received
help from neighbours. Seventy-one per cent felt that they needed other help also but only thirty-nine per cent of respondents actually obtained other help.

10.3 Impact on personal health

Table 10 shows proportions stating various levels of perceived personal stress. A similar question was also asked about perceived levels of stress among the members of the family. While the distribution is similar, the mean frequency on a 5 point scale for men is 2.9 but for women it is statistically significantly higher at 3.5. In other words, women tend to perceive stress occurring more frequently among family members than do men. This does not, however, compare husbands and wives in the same families. Women were also slightly more likely than men to state that family relationships had changed during the drought. Half the sample overall reported that such change had occurred.

Table 10
Frequency of perceived personal stress. n = 103

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Qld</th>
<th>NSW</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very rarely</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly often</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very often</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Twenty per cent of whole sample had taken work off the farm due to the drought. As we discussed previously, off-farm work is known to create stressful situations often for farm family members (Gray et al., 1993). Thirty-six per cent reported some affect of the drought on their health, while 3 per cent reported an extensive impact. Eighteen per cent reported some affect of drought on their children's health.

Despite these apparent problems and the stated need for support, only 11 per cent reported using a personal counselling service despite 73 per cent being aware of a counselling service available to them. Ninety per cent said that they believed that some people may have been reluctant to ask for help when they needed it. Fewer men than women reported seeking counselling.

10.4 Impact on spouse relationship

10.4.1 Personal decision making: Our study identified a strong correlation between decision making to remain on the property and a close working partnership between spouses. Husbands and wives were relying on each other’s labour both physically on the property and intellectually, in maintaining accurate accounts and stock records and in dealing with the business side of the property. Many of the women respondents reported undertaking all kinds of activity associated with animal husbandry on the property (outside the home) which they had never had to do before,
as exemplified by one who found she had to ‘knock calves on the head with a pair of pliers to save the cows’.

With some increased pressures of off-farm labour we also found that families were relying more and more on each other for support as their neighbours began to work off-farm, or as neighbouring properties were sold and neighbours left. Women mentioned that as their female neighbours began working off-farm, their own access to female companionship became less accessible. We also found that off-farm ‘labour’ included, for women, much unpaid, voluntary work associated with drought relief. For one, who was the local coordinator for drought relief it was a ‘huge stress’ as she felt she was needed on the property and instead was getting:

... caught up in these things because I can’t get out of it because nobody else would do it. I tried to get people to help and it ends up a nightmare. People were very grateful to receive it but no many people were very happy to help, as usual (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

Our study included three questions which specifically addressed the issue of decision-making between husband and wife during the drought - the answers identify a perception among the women interviewed that in many cases they did not feel involved in major decision making. In a number of cases, women explained that decision making rested with their husbands or their fathers-in-law, or in some cases, with their sons. One woman described the decision-making process in her household as one based on precedent and history:

I usually only hear about things when they happen over the phone. Our family is one based on precedent, what [husband’s] father did - generations change but some things stay the same. [My husband says] “if my father wanted something to buy something, he would just go and do it, he never checked [with anyone else]’ (Female beef producer, CQ,1996).

This was not an uncommon response - another woman saw the effect it had on her husband:

My husband had worked the property all his life. His father ran it [and] made all the decisions. [My husband] didn’t have a say. His father used to say “I am going to do this this way, and that was how it was done” despite [my husband] having other views (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

A number of women identified the fact that they were ‘partly involved’ in decision making, but when the major decisions needed to be taken, it was left to their husband to take it. As one woman sheep/wheat producer said: ‘That’s their side, they make the decisions and say they are doing it’.

In some cases, decision making had a direct effect on the future lives of individual women, yet they had no capacity to participate in the discussion. A very emotional response from one woman, involved describing the decision made to use all the family's savings to get through the drought (rather than go into debt). She explained that these savings were originally set aside to build their first home on the property. As a result of this decision, in which she had no part, the family remains in the modified shed they have always lived in, and as there is now no money available, will
probably continue to live in it until their property recovers enough to be able to save
the deposit for their home.

Within the context of the effect of the drought, decisions about the property that were
considered important by the women and not the men included opening up the property
for tourism and sending the men off to do off-farm work.

**10.4.2 Managing role changes:** The drought precipitated a subtle change in roles
for some women producers which may not have been detected if our interviews were
conjointly conducted. It is now well documented that women on the land have been
providers of reserve labour for the property while still maintaining their home maker
roles (see for example, Sachs 1983; Gibson, Baxter and Kingston 1990; Alston 1995).
Women's work has traditionally included the domestic sphere which was 'according
to the accepted prescription of the time, and that acceptance gave each a sense of
surety' (Alston 1995:34).

Not all the women producers of our study were confined to home tasks prior to the
drought, but there were some who expected their role as home maker to remain
exclusive and ongoing. Our interviews enabled a reflection by these women on the
profound changes to their roles. For example, one married to a beef producer
maintained her home right up until the drought become overwhelming, not
participating in work external to the home at all. Then, as a cost saving measure, a
decision was made to no longer employ itinerant labour. As a result, this woman
became what she termed 'the workman'.

> I was purely only the housewife and now I'm not. I'm the workman ... so I have to go
> and help everyday ... I'm one of these that go from daylight to dark and I'm still
> working at night to do the ironing or whatever (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

This woman’s 'sense of surety' about her role on the land as home maker has
disappeared with no likelihood of it returning to what was previously a recognised and
understood demarcation between house tasks and property work, on the contrary, she
says that

> I can't see myself ever getting back into the house again and employing a person
> and I don't like that thought.

Some women responded to the drought crisis by undertaking to work off-farm. As a
result, not only their roles changed, but so too did their daily routines. The men noted
this change in routine in their interviews. For the women however, our interviews also
exposed deeper personal change; one which affected their self esteem in unexpected
ways as one woman explained: 'I guess working off the place I've learnt new skills ...
It is a positive thing’. For another woman married to a beef producer, off-farm work
posed a dilemma between keeping the house up to a previously defined 'standard' set
when she was purely the home maker. As a result she describes both the positive and
negative:

> ... being frazzled on weekends ... but by the same token, being at work, meeting
different people and they are usually young teachers and they are fun to be with
and you sort of forget a few of the stresses when you are at work (Female beef
producer, CQ, 1996).
10.4.3 Adjusting to change: Not surprisingly, the male producers overwhelmingly related their responses by reflecting on their property, the 'outside' domain that they knew so well and they made little or no comment on the 'inside' events in the house. Here we purposefully use the term ‘inside/outside’ rather than the more sociological one of ‘public/private’, in recognition of terminology the women themselves consistently used. The response by the women about the men who are always outside doing property work is another dimension of difference that may have been suppressed in joint interviews. For example, many women acknowledged how stressful it must be for the men to see and live the drought on a daily basis - as one woman suggests:

... and the strain it [the drought] has mentally [weighed on us], mainly the men, I suppose, they are dealing with it every day. You are a bit sheltered when you are inside the house. You obviously know about it but you are not seeing the water breakdowns and no water ... (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

Some of the women expressed personal anger at the amount of effort required by both partners, and the lack of response to it. One put it this way:

I used to get angry - in spite of the drought, the calves looked terrific. We had put a lot of work into them and then they were doing well. Of course we had to sell them, the whole lot, terribly cheaply - it was heartbreaking. It really infuriated me as well. All that time - wasted. [It was] depressing (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

Another woman producer whose 'place' as she so clearly identified, was inside her home and not outside on the property, felt stressed by what she considered 'needed to be done' in the home but felt powerless to redress this concern as her time was being taken up in working 'outside'. A similar feeling was expressed by another woman:...

I'd like to be the city counterpart. Your money can be in your own little world instead of it all being spent outside.

Our respondents identified that sacrifices were often made for the 'outside' in preference to any 'inside' jobs that some women felt that needed doing. As discussed above in decision-making, one woman had no choice but put aside her hopes for a house for her family as the savings were used to maintain the outside - her husband's domain. Not all women expressed such a clear understanding of the separation between inside/outside. Some 'still enjoy going outside working' but in all our interviews, the major commitment of all the women remained to their home - their ‘inside’ domain. The ‘outside’ work was often hard and relentless. One woman, who maintained the family’s beef property while her husband worked off-farm in another town described her experience:

I used to climb into the silo - it was really really hot and shovel the feed mix. I would take a book with me, shovel for a while, stop, read, shovel a bit more. It was exhausting - we didn’t employ a married couple, it was cheaper to employ a single, casual, so there was a lot more cooking to be done, and also the privacy because there were a lot more people in the house, more coming and going (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

One of the lesser known ‘inside’ tasks that some women identified was the handling of the in-coming phone calls from stock agents to the bank managers. Although the
men may have discussions with these two institutions, the women producers are the first point of contact as many of them are the bookkeepers for their farm business. One woman explained that

... all the bookwork comes to here. The bank manager rings up for everything here. The accountant rings here. We get the first line of contact with everyone. And [it's] usually me (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

This was a common experience. In some cases, the drought had stressed the need to upgrade budgeting requirements and the technologies associated with them, as one husband and wife explained:

I didn’t understand computers and [neither did my wife] ... we didn’t understand the system and now we [do] and it’s good. It’s been hard to learn (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

It was very hard to learn and we’ve only had the computer for four years. I learned Powerpoint four years ago and we virtually educated our accountant the way we wanted and I can pretty much say we’ve got the bank manager thinking the way we think ... (Female sheep/wheat producer, 1997).

This ongoing task of handling the finances and the related phone calls was a source of stress in hard times for some women who felt that they had to take the brunt of this inside work. As one admitted “I don't want to have to talk to these people. That is when I started to take the phone off the hook’. Interviewing the men and women together may have not elicited such emotive responses to a task that could be deemed to be a 'normal' part of property business. But one woman, who was crying during this part of the interview, explains the gendered difference:

I think I tend to worry about the bank loan and the finances. Because I do the books I think it has a bigger effect on me, a different effect possibly.

10.5 Personal narratives

10.5.1 Discussing the drought: Our overall study identified sources of conversation which farm people have on drought, comparing particularly the frequency of interaction with family, friends and government advisers. Our study found that individual producers discuss drought quite readily, but tend to do so more often with family and other producers than with their agriculture department (government) advisers. One third of respondents had not discussed drought early in its onset with agriculture department advisers at all. With regard to personal values which may impinge on communication among family members, there is some evidence of weak correlation between wanting a child or children to continue farming and the frequency of discussion about drought with family members (r = .2). It may be that those who are certain that they want a child to continue discusses drought and its onset more often than would those with no such wish.
Table 11
How often drought is discussed with family and others n = 103

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Never</th>
<th>Very rarely</th>
<th>Sometimes</th>
<th>Fairly often</th>
<th>Very often</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other producers</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>50</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agriculture</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>department</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Totals may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

10.5.2 Relating to children: Intergenerational issues emerged as important throughout all the interviews, and emerged as both positive and negative indicators. On the positive side, the continued reliance on parents by some of the respondents, as well on children by others can be identified as a major reason supporting the decision to remain on the land. All our case study respondents agreed first, that their immediate or extended families were the primary sources of support and second, that children were a very important component of the capacity to cope with crisis.

All our case study respondents had children - many of the adult children living close by and offering encouragement and love and well as labour. Even young children became a focus of attention and love, and when asked of any ‘good’ outcomes of the drought, many of the families we interviewed reflected on their increased reliance on other family members, and their strength and growth as a family in hard times. In a couple of cases, women producers identified their husband’s family as supportive - particularly their mother-in-law. These particular women did not identify any friends or neighbours, only family support. In the case of one woman producer this meant that

... if it’s a busy time [the sons] will come home and help with whatever happens to be - whichever season it is they'll come home and help. If it’s family wise we’ve got relations in Broken Hill and they come over, even though they are in their seventies, they still come. That’s family and they come and at harvest time which relieves it for the men and leaves our men to do the bigger heavier work. They are always a big help (Female sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1996).

There were many questions relating to children throughout the interview schedule which elicited varying responses from each partner. Male producers expressed concern about their children's education and the likelihood of them having a future on the land. The women concurred with these responses but brought other dimensions to the topic of children. In one women’s focus group in New South Wales, the discussion turned to children and education for the future. These women felt that this was the way in which the community would establish sustainability and there would be a future for the land. However they also felt that other Australians needed to be ‘educated’ about the needs of rural communities. Many women felt that living on rural properties enhanced the upbringing of their children. For example one woman beef producer said:
I think it is a wonderful place to bring up children. They have got plenty of space, [and] I'm not worrying about traffic or other people ...

In New South Wales, the responses confirmed this view:

..well schooling is a problem if it wasn't for schooling it would be an ideal way to bring kids up ...they haven't got the [same] pressures in ... town ... they just seem to be able to have a freer type of life, they are never bored ... (Female sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

This anxiety about 'other people' was also expressed by other women who thought that the land/rural life offered some protection from what they termed the 'riff raff part of the community'. In this sense, isolation can be viewed as a shield and a controlling device for children one woman explained, albeit with some ambivalence:

... if our children want to play with someone they just can't go off and do it. We have to say right and put them in the car and take them. We can control them [although] I don't like that word (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

Some of the women in the study gave birth during the drought years of 1991-1996. One woman interview had three children in this period with little family support as her parents lived in the capital city (700 kilometres away) and her mother-in-law lived in the regional centre (150 kilometres away). Her main source of concern in these six years was the lack of time to do anything for herself or to relax. Time was also crucial when the whole family went to the regional centre 'for business' as she had to take the three children. For this woman, the issue then became affordable occasional childcare in the business district her regional centre. Such childcare as was available was out of the reach of the family budget. Visits to the 'city' usually looked forward to with anticipation, became instead a major, often traumatic undertaking, one to which this woman’s husband did not allude in his interview.

Children were also a source of sorrow for some of the women interviewed in this study. Two women experienced the death of a child during drought. For one, it was particularly painful as she had two stillborn children in consecutive years. While her husband, acknowledged that this was 'sad' he did not elaborate on his own feelings nor acknowledge the extent of the tragedy this may have had on his wife. In response to a question that asked for comment on the personal effect of drought, this woman painfully recalled that:

... we had just lost our little baby and that was a major thing in my life.

This woman’s life with her surviving children was not all happiness either. She talks here of pumping water for the cattle - an extra task that is done in drought and the way this affected her relationship with the children and their routine:

I'd take the children to meet the school bus and we'd come home and pump. We wouldn't be home till dark, because we'd be pumping in four or five places. I suppose the kids never had time to play or anything because there is always pumping (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).
The focus on children also emerged in the New South Wales interviews. There, one woman poignantly recalled that her now grown daughter had never really known life without dry times or major drought:

For most of their grown up years there has been a drought ... I can remember [my daughter] doing a dance when she was two years old because the water was coming through the roof and flooding our the floors from one end of the room to the other and she thought we were going to be washed out. It’s been a long time since she has seen anything like that. But they know from us, how good it can be, and how good a lifestyle it can be, and that you don’t always have drought (Female sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

10.5.3 Relating to the community: As we discussed in the previous chapter, issues of community and family and the impact on both emerged during our interviews. The longevity of the drought (in some parts as long as six seasons at the time of interviews), resulted in some early assistance, drought relief funding, and intermittent support from the media. In the early days ‘everybody got out and complained to each other and talked about it’ but as the drought continued ‘you get sick of hashing over the same problems’ (male beef producer, CQ). For some, the conditions had strengthened their relationships within their community.

Rather than getting in paid labour [we] will go and help a neighbour with something and if we need something they help us and we help them which is a good way. If money is a bit tight you can help each other out [and] it's a big help. It just gives you that bit of community involvement I think (Female sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

Most of our case study respondents continued to be involved in activities in the community, some for as long as 40 years. Most, if not all of these ‘community activities’ are now related to issues of production, as there is little or no time for purely social activities. Many of the women producers felt the additional stress of having to maintain and support their local organisations, for example

... the same people do everything. The same people who are doing the CWA, are in the Church, they are in the Cattleman’s Union and they are in Landcare, and they are in this and in that. It is not only that they are giving their time, it is their money as well (Female beef producer, CQ, 1997)

For this woman, the expectation that she would continue her involvement when others were not participating, had become a strain ‘I still do it, [but] I’ve lost the urge’.

Landcare meetings emerged as one of the principle ways in which people were still able to ‘get together’ socially. In both regions, Landcare was active and many of our respondents belonged to their local group. However some of our respondents noticed a dropping off in attendance:

Some people are frightened to come. They come to the odd meeting but they are a bit frightened to come to hear the truth really and they are a bit worried about the peer pressure. ... We try to get them more involved. But you can’t push people too far, they have to make the decisions (Female sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

10.5.4 Thinking about the future: Stewardship and the relationship between generations is a major reason given for the decision to remain on the property when
others around them are leaving. One of our case study respondents identified himself as a ‘third or fourth generation cattleman’. On reflection about the decision to stay he said:

I would feel that I’ve let the people that came before me down. I’m not here because of all the things I’ve done in my life. I was helped here because of my father. My father was helped by his father. I would feel that I had let some of them down (Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).

However the negative aspect to the intergenerational issue is that of ‘handing over the family farm’. One sheep/wheat producer, now in his late 50s and with three sons, has obviously given this some thought.

... by the time the father gets around to handing the property over to them and the pension is available ... most of the young ones have left to work. Once they get up and go away and meet girls from other areas ... they will never come back. It is harder still to maintain two families on the one property, let alone three or four (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1997).

Eventually, as the interviews identified, each family has to confront some aspect of intergenerational decision making as one woman explained:

We know of a family who did have to leave the land and the son got nothing because his mother owned the property and she sold it. By the time she covered all the debts there was nothing left. ...It’s the same old story, when do you give up? (Female beef producer, CQ, 1997).

Some of the women interviewed identified the stress on their husband as emanating from their need to maintain the property in stewardship. As one husband and wife discussed it:

..he feels he has to be able to provide that if our son wants to be a farmer it has to be sitting here waiting for him. They feel they have to have it, if the boys want to be farmers, they’ve got to be able to provide that for them. I can’t think of any other business where they think they have to set up and be ready for the boys to take over. It doesn't happen in any other business but it does in this business (Female sheep/wheat producer).

I don't think that's strange (Male sheep/wheat producer).

That makes it hard. Everything we are doing we have to get bigger because we feel that if [our son] wants to come back on the farm we have to be looking to be holding over 100,000 acres and it's not going to be viable and that’s a big pressure to put on yourself. You've just got to get bigger and bigger to have that ready and waiting ... girls don’t do that (F)

Well, that’s up to the kids (M)

I say be a doctor or lawyer or something and get away (F)

Most of the kids, if you give them a very good education and give them the opportunity to see something ... (M)

They won't want to come back (F)

That’s no excuse. I had no problem with my education and I had the opportunity to do whatever I wanted to do. I didn’t want to do anything else (M)
We feel we don't need a lot. We just think that as long as we can give the kids the best education we can give them, then we can't do anything more for them. We don't want to take them off here and there and on extravagant holidays or anything like that, that's not us, but we want to be able to provide a sound background for the kids and to give them everything that we possibly can ... (F)

10.5.5 Searching for spirituality: Some women producers who felt the stress of drought and balancing inside/outside work often sought two sites of peace - the garden and their personal spirituality. Men producers offered little or no comment on these two different dimensions of the drought experience. Our study suggests that the garden can be seen a powerful antithesis to drought - a place of water, serenity and greenness. For the women that 'scrounged' any spare water, the garden was a haven, as one explains:

If we didn't have a garden to spend that bit of time we would go crazy. If you are a gardener, you know you can get out in the garden, nothing else seems to matter. It might only be for a couple of hours but nothing else seems to matter (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996).

The garden was also a place of sadness for other women as they were unable to maintain it. The drought (and their husbands) prompted decisions that diverted any spare water and restraints on spending as one reflected:

We could be gardening too, I can't go out and buy a plant. I did the other day, they were on sale ... if [my husband] saw them he would not be happy [as we] have got to tighten our belt (Female beef producer, CQ, 1996)

For one woman who had experienced the full impact of the drought, the death of her garden was the final ignominy. She then made the decision to leave her property and move into the family house in the regional centre.

The other source of comfort during the drought for many of the women producers has been their faith and maintaining a sense of spirituality. Only one male producer confided his religious beliefs to us at interview. For some women producers, drought has revived and maintained as well as questioned their faith. This was clearly an important support to them in having the strength to survive a six year drought. In one community, women established a Bible group that meets on their properties, where they come to share, pray and console each other. For some women, it was clearly a time of testing their faith, as one explained:

... we do believe in God so basically [we believe that ] if we cast our prayers upon him ... he would care for us. I think I have failed miserably there because I don't think I have got the comfort ... the Lord will think I am not grateful for what he has done for me ...

In conclusion, this study has identified the way in which the drought of the 1990s will have long term effect on the way in which rural Australians live their lives. Research conducted in the late 1970s and early 1980s found that 'men have usually discussed farming problems only with other men’. It was argued that this was because ‘the pastoral community is little influenced by the mass media and has little contact with urban society, where the status and image of women has undergone its most public
change’ (Gibbs, 1989:36). While our study confirmed some of these findings, but has gone further - we believe that the lives of those women and men in areas affected by drought in the 1990s will never return to their pre-drought roles and status. In this sense, the drought has effectively banished a way of life and introduced a new one.
Conclusions

... the drought just doesn't change [things] overnight does it? It comes on slowly and the country here has changed [even] in the last three weeks. After that green tinge we had from that rain in February, it is all gone now so it is continually changing and you can't really pinpoint a period of time I don't think. It's not like one day it's hot and the next day it's cold. The drought is not like that ... (Female sheep/wheat producer, NSW, 1996).

Most areas of rural Australia have experienced drought since the introduction of farming in the eighteenth century. Most of Australia experiences extreme rainfall variability. In inland regions this is also accompanied by high average mean temperatures, creating the desert and desert-like landscapes which feature so heavily in advertisements for such commodities as four wheel drive vehicles, but which most Australians rarely experience. Historically drought has been one of the most evocative and ‘Australian’ aspects of our national identity. Historically also, drought has not been regarded as part of a normal cycle. It has been viewed as a crisis, as an aberration, a strange quirk of nature. Since droughts appear unpredictable and destructive and therefore ‘above’ personal control, there has been a cultural expectation that farmers and farming families will be 'bailed out' that is, supported by banks and by governments.

Drought has been defined historically as a natural event that ravaged the land resulting in hardship for farmers and producers. Prior to the 1990s, the government response to such disasters was to formulate and implement policy designed to overcome the 'natural' disaster of drought. The primary tool of this policy was financial assistance for the men and women on the land. In the last few years this ‘bandaid’ approach to help and a lack of a national policy on drought prompted a major review and a change in policy direction for the Commonwealth and the states and territories. The National Drought Policy of 1992 and its State equivalents have shifted the notion of drought as 'natural' to drought as part of the risk associated with farming. Until now this shift in policy has been analysed mainly within economic and climatic frameworks.

While all rural communities, from scattered farm settlements to regional cities, suffer rapid economic change and social dislocation from time to time, farming areas have special problems associated with the nature of on-farm production. They are suffering long term economic, and in many places environmental, decline along with short term shocks as international prices fluctuate and climatic conditions such as drought. At the centre of this debate is a basic tension in government rhetoric and policy, as on the one hand there is the argument for the need for regional representation and access to services on an equal basis to those in urban centres - however at the same time, there has been a diminution of services based on a per capita rather than needs basis and argued from a ‘market’ perspective, so that if the population declines, the services are withdrawn. In structural terms, non-metropolitan Australia has long been relatively impoverished, suffering economic and social disadvantage linked to ‘uneven development’. It can also be seen as dependent on metropolitan institutions over which it has little influence despite the historical intervention of the Country (now National) Party and farmer organisations.
While governments have been redefining drought, its meaning to farm families remains clear. It is for many a disaster, not one which is sudden in occurrence or impacts, but one which can profoundly affect people's well-being. Our study has found that the problem with interpreting drought as a disaster is twofold: it arises slowly, without cataclysm like storm or earthquake. The more profound problem lies in its frequency. It occurs in patterns which are to some extent predictable if not reliable. It has therefore now been interpreted as an event which can be prepared for.

Our findings show that the cost of the experience of drought over many seasons to families can be measured not only in loss of stock and depletion of resources, but also in deterioration of family cohesion, loss of community networks, a sense of and in some cases, a sense of being abandoned by the rest of (urban) Australia. The terms of trade for Australian agriculture, the economic conditions which farmers face and the continuing decline in the agricultural environment under these conditions make preparation for drought very difficult if not impossible for many as they must seek to maximise productive output. Despite this, those farmers we interviewed do see that preparation for drought distinguishes good management practice.

There is strong evidence within this Report to show the impact of the drought of the 1990s is such that rural Australia will never be the same again. There is a decline in population; a closing down of small businesses; fewer and fewer opportunities for casual or itinerant work; more and more producers working ‘off-farm’ and a reduction in available services. At the same time, as our study has shown, changing roles within farm families combined with changing practices on the property have meant that farm families are beginning to realise that the effect of the drought has fundamentally changed the way in which they now manage their lives and their production.

The current Federal drought policy has meant that it is largely left to State governments to be the direct providers of financial assistance. This in turn results in a more localised economic response. Regional community infrastructure and viability is fragile and under great stress. We find State governments are scaling back - reducing or closing their services with the consequent ‘ripple’ effect of closure of small businesses, of bank branches and a subsequent outmigration of population. There seems to be little coordination between those arms of Government which promote the diminution of services and the rationalisation of programs and those which argue and support greater assistance to rural families. The scaling back of police services, the closure of the CES offices, the reduction in regional health services - these act as catalysts for community fragmentation. Providing rural assistance in the form of subsidies to producers is certainly useful - but short term and attenuated. One male producer from the western rangelands put it this way:

[The response from the Federal government?] Well I could answer that five different ways. It was generous to the people that got the assistance and totally inadequate for the people who missed out. But, then again, another interesting thing, we were trying to get it but they invented it and if they invented it and had given it to some people and not to others, that [is] the inequity of it. Either everybody’s ineligible or nobody but changing the boundaries around and saying these people could get it and people in the very boundary missed out. The Bourke Shire have been exceptional circumstances declared for about four years and the people in the Wilcannia Shire can’t get it and it’s just as dry so the whole thing is a bit of a schmozzle (Male sheep/wheat producer, NSW,1997).
We would strongly argue that a long term strategy is required which will view the rural in Australia as intrinsic to the whole nation and provide coordinated and integrated support in times of hardship. Potentially, such arrangements as are presently in place (both federal and state) offer much less opportunity for coordination and integration, and unless a determined effort is made, such an uncoordinated environment will not be able to marshal the resources necessary to maintain the support required when seasons do return to normal. There is a fear within the rural community that they have already been ‘forgotten’ by the policy makers.

As the producers remind us, things do not get ‘automatically better’ as soon as the rain comes. In addition, the complex and increasingly important relationship between drought, commodity prices, globalisation and rural restructuring is one which the all agricultural producers are all too familiar with, but which many policy makers, who perhaps view ‘the drought’ as something which can be managed and then left behind, need familiarisation with. We leave one male beef producer to have the final word:

Quite apart from all that of whether you are in drought or not ... the rural industry is facing one the biggest crises of all time with this jolly cattle market. We are in such a depressed time. People can probably stand feeding cattle, putting cattle up for agistment all that sort of thing. We can do everything we possibly can to manage [ourselves] and [our] own operations through the period of drought, but when you are faced with other situation, such as the industry you rely on for your income which is virtually going out from under you. I mean you combine the two, you have a major disaster. You have a financial situation facing a lot of people that they can’t do anything about (Male beef producer, CQ, 1996).
Communications Strategy

12.1 Introduction
As part of the original proposal for this study, we identified the need to make the findings of the research as widely available as possible. At the time, (1995) we wrote that:

The research findings would be disseminated throughout Australia, possibly through various rural media, by way of newsletters produced by the major rural government departments and through publications such as The Country Web, a newsletter for rural women and their families produced by the N.S.W. Department of Agriculture and the Rural Women's Network auspiced by the Victorian Department of Agriculture, as well as through rural community organisations such as the CWA, Landcare, Rotary. We would also be interested in exploring the possibility of speaking to groups of farming families through the electronic media.

*We would stress the necessity to ensure that the findings of this study be disseminated as widely as possible.*

The urgent need to disseminate this information to these interested individuals and groups meets the following goals:

- To improve community awareness of risk, preparedness and response [of drought]
- To develop and implement programs to assist community understanding of vulnerability to hazards [associated with drought, and drought management]
- To foster partnerships within communities
- To develop a framework that will generate quality programs in the future.

12.2 Successful dissemination already undertaken

12.2.1 Conferences and Publications: We have (see Attachment D) already presented material developed from this study at a number of conferences, workshops and seminars, both in Australia and overseas. We have also written a number of published papers and two published chapters in collected works.

12.2.2 Media: During the course of the study, the Principal Investigators appeared on radio and television (CQ and NSW) and presented brief outlines of the study to a number of interested groups, for example, Red Cross (NSW); Rotary (CQ) as well as incorporating the research into our graduate and undergraduate teaching.

12.2.3 Graduate students: As mentioned elsewhere, the project has encouraged graduate students - Ms. Rachel Williams has written her honours dissertation at Charles Sturt University (supervised by Dr. Gray) entitled: *A Critical Analysis of Elements of the Emerging Drought Policy in Australia.* Professor Lawrence and Dr.
Stehlik are currently co-supervising a doctoral student at CQU, Mr. Vaughan Higgins, whose topic is: From Assistance to Self-Reliance: The Changing Role of the State in Rural Adjustment Policy.

12.3 Short term strategies
12.3.1 The drought report - dissemination: We recommend the following:

- That copies of the published Report be made available to all those families who were involved in the study both in CQ and in NSW.
- That copies be made available to relevant the New South Wales and Queensland Government departments.
- That copies be made available immediately to the Federal Department of Primary Industries and Energy.

12.3.2 Publicity on Drought Report: We recommend the following:

- That joint press releases be forwarded to major media outlets as soon as the Report is published.
- That the Principal Investigators make themselves available to the media to comment on the Report findings.
- That the Principal Investigators write a ‘think piece’ for major newspapers in NSW, Q and The Australian, to detail the report findings and make it known to readers that it is available.

12.4 Long term strategies
12.4.1 The development and establishment of a drought study website: Funding would be required to cover the cost associated with the development and establishment of an electronic Information Package - a Web Site, as well as the purchase of some supportive software. The Drought Study Web Site would become an integral and important part of the Rural Social and Economic Research Centre’s Web Site (see: http://www.cqu.edu.au/research/rsrec/home.html) and would then become available to local, national and international individuals and communities searching for information about ‘drought’.

CQU has the necessary hardware (WWW server, disk space, access, scanners) to allow such a site to be established. Funding would be required for some specialised WWW authoring software and to pay a programmer to design, implement, and maintain the Web Site.

We would design the Web Site around certain keywords - for example: Agriculture/Community/Climate/History/Media/Policy/Farm Management - as well as certain themes - for example: Impact on Women; Impact on Communities; Impact on Production and so on.

12.4.2 The writing, production and distribution of a drought study information package: Funding would be required to cover the costs associated
with development, production and distribution of a non-electronic Information Package.

The purpose of the development of an Information Package is to meet the needs to communities and individuals outside of Internet access. In particular, this package would be aimed at Rural Community Libraries, Rural Schools and relevant Federal, State and Local Government Departments. The package would consist of:

- a single page flyer briefly outlining the research and summarising key findings
- a monograph of no more than 30 pages which outlines the Study and Findings in easily accessible language - including photographs
- brief reference list for those interested in pursuing further information about drought
- directions to the Drought Study Web Site
References


Agriculture and Rural Restructuring Group (1989) *Sustainable Rural Communities in Canada.* Proceedings of Rural Policy Seminar, Saskatoon, Canada, ARRG.


Sociology, 59 2, 255-265.


Senate Rural and Regional Affairs and Transport References Committee (1994) Rural Adjustment, Rural Debt and Rural Reconstruction, AGPS, Canberra.

Senate Standing Committee on Rural and Regional Affairs (1992) National Drought Policy - appropriate government responses to the recommendations of the Drought


Attachment A.

Questionnaire used as basis of interviews of farm families

*I would first like to talk to you about the property and what you are producing.*

1. What is the property currently producing?

2. What percentage of your family's land is dedicated to **crops**? __ __ %  
   **grazing**? __ __ %  
   Is this different from previous years? yes  1  no  2  
   How has it changed?

3. How many acres/hectares does your family farm altogether, including land leased or sharefarmed? __ __ __ __ __ __

4. Is that acres or hectares? (please circle)  
   acres   hectares

5. Has the drought really broken for you? yes  1  no  2

6. Is this area drought declared now? yes  1  no  2

7. Has it been drought declared during the last 5 years? yes  1  no  2  
   go to 10

8. For how long was/is the area drought declared? __ __ months

9. In _______ year(s)

10. Are you eligible for drought assistance under 'exceptional circumstances'?  
    yes  1  no  2  
    Have you tried to obtain 'exceptional circumstances'? yes  1  no  2  
    go to 12

   How did you find about 'exceptional circumstances'?

11. What happened when you tried to obtain 'exceptional circumstances'?

12. How does the drought differ from the one we suffered in the early 1980s?  
    Is it  
    much worse   worse   about the same   not as bad   nowhere near as bad
    1   2   3   4   5

13. Do you have access to a normally reliable water supply sufficient for the home?  
    yes  1  no  2  
    go to 16

14. What is it eg river, bore, spring?

15. Has this dried up? yes  1  no  2  
    go to 18

16. For how long have you been without water for the home? __ __ months

17. How do you obtain water for the home?  
   carting it in?
   other?_____________________________
Did you have to purchase it?

18. When do you expect it to dry up if the drought does not break? 
   never or in ___ months

Do you have access to a normally reliable water supply sufficient for stock? 
yes 1 no 2 
go to 16

14. What is it eg river, bore, spring?

15. Has this dried up? yes 1 no 2 

16. For how long have you been without water for stock? ___ months

17. How do you obtain water for stock?

18. When do you expect it to dry up if the drought does not break? 
   never or in ___ months

What is the current cost of water for you? $______________
[If cannot work out $, type of expenditure eg fuel is okay.]

Can we please talk about the early period of the drought, when it was first becoming apparent?

18. About when did it become apparent to you that you were in drought? 
   month [if remembered] ___ ___ year ___ ___


21. Early in the drought, who did you discuss the drought with
   your family 1 2 3 4 5
   other producers 1 2 3 4 5
   Agriculture department? 1 2 3 4 5
   other? ________________ 1 2 3 4 5
   other? ________________ 1 2 3 4 5

22. What sorts of things come up in those conversations?

19. What effects of the onset [when it first started] of the drought were the most important to you personally?

20. What was the main thing that finally convinced you that you were in a drought?

21. When you realised when you were in drought back in ______ [see question ?], for how long were you able to maintain your property's level of production?

22. not at all or _______ years
23. Do you hope to get back to your pre-drought stocking rate?  yes 1  no 2

24. How would you describe the overall effect of the drought on your property's output?
1. eliminated it completely
2. reduced it to its lowest point ever
3. reduced it substantially
4. reduced it to below average
5. had little effect
6. had no effect

25. In terms of your main product, what has been the extent of the decline from an average year:
from ______ tonnes/bales/bags/ [underline] in 19__ to ________ most recently

26. In a good year, what proportion of your income is derived from the property?  about ___ ___ %

27. How would you describe the effect of the drought on your family's income?
1. eliminated it completely
2. reduced it to its lowest point ever
3. reduced it substantially
4. reduced it to below average
5. had little effect
6. had no effect

27a. How extensively have you done the following to keep the property going during the drought

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
<th>not possible on this property</th>
<th>not at all</th>
<th>a little</th>
<th>moderately</th>
<th>extensively</th>
<th>very extensively</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Put stock on agistment?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Take in agisted stock?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold breeding stock?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sold other stock?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took stock on the road?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Spelled paddocks?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reduced hired labour?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing off-property work?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut back property costs?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cut back household costs?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planting a new crop?</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other__________________________</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

35. Have any of these problems been worsened by the drought?
not a problem made a little worse made somewhat worse made a lot worse
rising water tables
salinity
soil erosion
acidity
loss of soil nutrients
acidity
proliferation of pests
loss of wildlife
weeds
death of trees
other______

39. Are you able to carry out any work to help solve those problems? yes 1 no 2

40. Has the drought affected your capacity to do this work? yes 1 no 2

Do you feel that the drought has forced you to become
more business-like? 1 yes 2 no
more environmentally aware? 1 yes 2 no

42. From your point of view, what has been the biggest decision made so far about the property during the drought?

43. How do you contribute to that decision about the property made during the drought?
   1 I made the decision alone
   2 I took a lead in the discussion
   3 I was partly involved in the decision-making
   4 I was not involved in the decision-making.

44. What did you feel you stood to lose when this decision had to be made?

41. In your daily routine work on the property, what things are you doing now that you did not do before the onset of drought?
   Are you working longer hours on the property because of the drought?

46. Did family members on and off the property support you? yes 1 no 2

go to 49

47. Who were they? __________________________ _______________________
   __________________________ _______________________

48. How did they help?

49. What are the ages/sex of the family members who helped out because of the drought?
age   __ __       sex   __
50. Did you find that you were relying more on family labour? yes 1 no 2

46. Did neighbours help you? yes 1 no 2 go to 49

48. How did they help?

51. Did you feel that you needed other help? yes 1 no 2

52. Did you obtain help? yes 1 no 2 go to 54

53. What kind

56. Have you taken paid work off the property? yes 1 no 2 go to 59

57. Did you do so as a result of the drought? yes 1 no 2

58. How has off-property work affected your life?

How far do you have to travel each day you work off the farm?

My family and I would have been better off if we had sold the property before the drought

Strong agree agree uncertain disagree strongly disagree

59. During the drought, how often did you run out of money for the following needs:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need</th>
<th>never</th>
<th>very rarely</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>fairly often</th>
<th>very often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Clothing</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Medicine</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fuel</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

_for those who have children:_

kids' needs
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Need</th>
<th>never</th>
<th>very rarely</th>
<th>sometimes</th>
<th>fairly often</th>
<th>very often</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Eg school books</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holidays</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

60. Overall, has the family's financial position during the drought

1 become much worse
2 become worse
3 stayed about the same
4 improved
5 improved considerably?

61. Now, is your family's income
1 not enough to buy necessities
2 enough to meet necessities only
3 enough for only some of the things you want
4 enough for about everything you want
5 enough for everything you want and some left over for saving?

Is this property economically viable in the short term? yes 1 no 2
in the long term? yes 1 no 2

115. Could you please give me an indication of your equity in the property (ie the percentage of its value which you do not owe money on)? ______%

What percentage of your current income would be in the form of government assistance? If received any support through the Rural Adjustment Scheme
What kind of support? ___________________________________________________

Has your quality of life changed? yes 1 no 2
How has it changed?

45. How extensively has your health been affected by drought?

not at a very
not at all little moderately extensively extensively
1 2 3 4 5
(If affected) In what ways?

How often have you suffered stress during the drought? never seldom...
(If affected) In what ways have you been stressed?

How often have you noticed the other members of your family being stressed during the drought? never seldom...
(If affected) In what ways have they been stressed?

Have your family relationships changed during the drought? yes 1 no 2
In what ways?

Has personal counselling been available to you? yes 1 no 2
Have you sought such counselling? yes 1 no 2
Has it been useful? yes 1 no 2
Has it been sufficient? yes 1 no 2

63. Do you have any children? yes 1 no 2 go to 65

64. How were the children affected by the drought?
Did they

have to give up doing things they liked? yes 1 no 2
suffer health problems? yes 1 no 2
feel they were suffering more than their friends? yes 1 no 2

Were decisions made about your children's education because of the drought?
What were those decisions?

The next questions focus on your community

Are you a member of any of the following organisations?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Landcare</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Farmers' Association</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Service club eg Lions</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Church</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Parents and Citizens</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other farm organisation? (please specify)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport club eg golf</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other organisation? (please specify)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

During the drought, has your involvement in any of these organisations become less frequent? 1
stayed about the same? 2
become more frequent? 3
Which one(s) have been affected this way?

65. What have been the worst social and economic effects on the area around here?

66. How have the people of the district reacted to the drought? Did they get together to help each other? yes 1 no 2

Who did this
get together to obtain outside support? yes 1 no 2

Who did this
work well together? yes 1 no 2

Who did this
find divisions emerging over who should get assistance? yes 1 no 2 go to 68

Where did this happen?

67. Why didn't they work well together?

68. What were the most important things the people of the district community did?

69. Did the country community suffer from
not being able to keep in touch as much they had? yes 1 no 2

60. Did the country community suffer from

70. What was the biggest problem arising from the drought which the district has faced?

72. Do you think some people might have been reluctant to ask for help when they needed it? yes 1 no 2 go to 74
73. Why do you think they were reluctant?
   Have you heard about any evidence of abuse of drought relief?
   yes 1  no 2
   What evidence is there of this?

   How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement
   There are people in my industry in my district who are doing quite well despite the drought.

75. What do you think of the response to the drought by the Federal Government?
   generous 1  about right 2  inadequate 3
   State Government?
   generous 1  about right 2  inadequate 3
   Local Government?
   generous 1  about right 2  inadequate 3

76. Does being close to the State border affect your? yes 1  no 2
    go to 78

77. How does it affect you?
   Do people here feel neglected by the government?
   yes 1  no 2

In what ways?

78. How might the response of government be improved? [start with Federal Government]
   Are the current decision about the drought working
   against the producer? for the producer
   yes 1  no 2
   for/against the environment?
   yes 1  no 2

   How is this happening?

Do you believe government decisions about the drought are leading to farm amalgamations?
   yes 1  no 2
   better management?
   yes 1  no 2

79. Has the reporting of the drought by the local media been
   1 very accurate (go to
   2 about right (go to
   3 somewhat inaccurate
   4 very inaccurate?
   5 don't read it

80. In what ways was it wrong?

81. Has the reporting of the drought by the city/national media been
   1 very accurate (go to
   2 about right (go to
   3 somewhat inaccurate
   4 very inaccurate?
   5 don't read/listen/watch
82. In what ways was it wrong?
83. Are there any positive outcomes from the drought for the district? yes 1 no 2

84. What are they?
85. Can you remember any stories which you have heard about past droughts in this area or on this property, perhaps told by your parents/peers/previous owners?

86. Would you like to tell the one which impressed you most, please?

87. Who told you this story?

What will be your personal strategy when the drought finally breaks?

property management strategy...

What do you hope to achieve in the next 5 years? 10 years?

Do you have a business plan for your property? yes 1 no 2

Would you want expert support to develop a business plan? yes 1 no 2

What sort of support? ____________________________________________________

How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement
The future of agriculture in this area lies in more diversification and less specialisation.
The answer to the drought problem is to build more and larger dams.
[Invite elaboration]

It will help to know some of your background and that of your family.
88. For how long have you been operating a property? ___ ___ years (excluding childhood)
89. For how long have you been operating this property? ___ ___ years (excluding childhood)

90. For how many generations (including yours) has the property been in your family? ___ (1 if married into it)
91. For how long have you been living in this area? ___ ___ years
92. For how many generations has your family [not spouse's] lived in this area? 
93. Do you have any children (any age)? yes 1 no 2

94. How many children do you have (for blended families count all children)? ___ ___
95. How many of your children are old enough to help with property work?
   (If none, write 0) ___
96. How many of your children are old enough to have chosen a career?
   (If none, write 0 and go to ) ___
97. How many of your children have taken on this property as a career?
   (If none, write 0) ___
98. Do you want any of your children to continue in farming (including those already farming)?
   yes 1
99. Do you expect any of your children to continue in farming (including those already farming)?
   yes  1
   uncertain  2
   no  3

100. How long do you want to stay on the property?
   1 indefinitely
   2 until retirement
   3 until the children have grown up
   4 for a short time while we look for something else
   5 only until we can sell

101. How long do you expect to stay on the property?
   1 indefinitely
   2 until retirement
   3 until the children have grown up
   4 for a short time while we look for something else
   5 only until we can sell

102. Let's think about your 5 nearest neighbours, how many of them have you visited in their homes in the last 12 months? ____
    How many have you phoned in the last 12 months? ____
    Are your calls to your neighbours timed?

103. About how many of your relatives live in your district?
   1 none
   2 some
   3 about half
   4 most
   5 all

104. About how many of your friends live in your district?
   1 none
   2 some
   3 about half
   4 most
   5 all

105. About how many of your friends in your district know each other well?
   1 none
   2 some
   3 about half
106. About how many of your friends in your district know some or all of your relatives?

1 none
2 some
3 about half
4 most
5 all

Who, outside your family, has been the most important source of support for you during the drought?

107. To you, what are the important things about life on the land?

108. What sorts of things do you want to achieve on your property?

111. Are there some farmers who are recognised as better managers of drought in this area?

    yes 1     no 2

    How are they recognised?

112. How did the best farmers cope with the drought?

Has your ability to manage during the drought been affected by commodity prices? yes no

How strongly do you agree or disagree with this statement
Management really makes a difference in drought.

Is it possible to develop your property so that drought will never affect it (ie drought proof it)?

    yes no - why not

    Is your property drought-proof?      yes 1     no 2

    Are other properties in the district drought-proofed?

    What assistance would you need to do so?

    What is your opinion of the view that government should not consider drought to be a
disaster or an unusual and event and therefore not provide drought assistance to farmers?

May I ask you for some information about yourself and each of the people who lives on your
property?

116. What level of formal education have you completed?

    1 no formal schooling
    2 primary
    3 part secondary
    4 secondary without agriculture
    5 secondary with agriculture
    6 technical/trade
    7 tertiary other
    8 tertiary agriculture

118. What is your marital status?
119. How are you employed?
   01 full time employee
   02 employee part time
   03 self-employed (on-property)
   04 self-employed (off-property)
   05 self-employed (on-property) and employee part time (off-property)
   06 self-employed (on-property) and employee full time (off-property)
   07 self-employed (off-property) and employee part time (off-property)
   08 unemployed and not seeking work
   09 unemployed and seeking work
   10 self-employed and seeking work

120. (If working off the property) what is the main kind of work do you do off the property?

121. On average, about how much time do you spend each week working on the property?
  ___ ___ hours

122. On average, about how much time do you spend each week working off the property?
  ___ ___ hours

123. What is your age?
Back cover blurb:

This report details a two-year study undertaken with farm families (in Central Queensland and the western rangelands of New South Wales) focussing on their experiences (at the level of individual, family and community) while in drought during 1995 and 1996.

The study has developed a social construction of drought based on: stock, water and soil management strategies; family and community relationships; effectiveness of drought policies; individual and family health, and strategies for future recovery.

The report, jointly funded by RIRDC and the Land and Water Resources Research and Development Corporation, is the latest addition to our diverse range of over 250 research publications, and forms part of our Resilient Agricultural Systems Research and Development program.

Most of our publications are available for viewing, downloading or purchasing online through our website at www.rirdc.gov.au/pub/cat/contents.html

SPINE TEXT:

Drought in the 1990s

RIRDC Publication No. 99/14