



# House of Representatives Inquiry

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While the notion that communities require resources in the form of financial capital for their development and wellbeing has long been recognised, it has become increasingly apparent that economic resources alone do not lead to community sustainability and wellbeing. This re-evaluation has led to the recognition that combinations of resources are needed to foster community wellbeing, including natural capital, economic capital, institutional capital, human capital and social capital. Of these various capitals, social capital is the least concrete but can be understood to mean the social networks that link people to form a cohesive community (*Stone and Hughes 2002a .as cited by Holsworthy and Hartman 20009*)

## 1 Introduction

This submission will principally address the matters set out in the first point of the Committee's Terms of Reference "***The direct and indirect impact of the Proposed Basin Plan on regional communities, including agricultural industries, local business activity and community wellbeing***".

### **Our major emphasis is on "community wellbeing"**

Mallee Family Care has advocated for the rights of communities in North West Victoria and South West New South Wales since 1979 and while it has no intention of entering into the debate that has raged back and forth over the recommendations contained in the Murray Darling Basin Authority's Plan, we are strongly advocating that effective community adaptation measures be introduced in order to offset any further deterioration in the well-being of those communities and that their capacity for resilience is fully considered in the Government's response to the Plan.

We are firmly of the belief that by providing effective relief through community adaptation measures in respect to the likely impacts on community welfare and cohesion from the Basin Plan, it could be legitimately assumed that at the same time, and for the same cost, the government would be providing collateral assistance to the community in its current struggle against what can only be referred to as persistent and generational disadvantage.

## **2. What Prompts Our Concerns?**

According to a study issued by Judith Stubbs and Associates entitled Mildura Rural City Council Case Study – “Social and economic impacts of reduced Irrigation water 2010: “The impacts of a permanent reduction to irrigation water on Mildura Rural City case study area are likely to be significant, as irrigated agriculture forms a large proportion of both agricultural industries and the total economy of Mildura”. (1)

The study continues: “Our modelling indicates that, with a permanent reduction in water, ranging from 10% to 50% on the 2005-06 baseline year, Mildura LGA is predicted to lose at least 661 (3.2%) to 2,933 (14.2%) jobs in agriculture and related activities and from flow-on effects. Population loss ranging from at least 1,843 (3.7%) to 8,200 (16.5%) people is forecast from such water reductions. These are likely to be lower estimates due to Census undercounting and inability to identify all agricultural jobs in our analysis”. (2)

Most importantly the study found:” Existing indicators of community resilience and wellbeing for Mildura Rural City do not generally compare favourably with the Murray Darling Basin (MDB) and national averages (1), and Mildura’s relative disadvantage, relatively poor health indicators and measures of underlying human capital indicate that there would be constraints to flexible adaptation to structural change, particularly for more vulnerable groups. These socio-economic indicators are predicted to be somewhat worse.” (3)

The Stubb's study is supported in relation to its community well-being findings, by an "Economic and social profiles and impact assessment in the Murray Darling Basin" by Marsden Jacob and associates, for the Murray Darling Basin Authority in May 2010; this report on page 17, says "***The Nyah to Border region (which includes Sunraysia and takes in many of the communities of Mallee Family Care's Constituency), as a whole does not perform well against national socio-economic indicators. It has low socio- economic status, low literacy, high drug and alcohol abuse, high unemployment and significant pockets of disadvantage.... This provides challenges to social cohesion and inclusion***". (4)

To put these "challenges" into more detailed terms: According to the Mildura Social Indicators Report 2008 compiled by Professor Tony Vinson, the Mildura Rural City Council area, which (based on ABS 2006 Statistical Division Boundaries), has a population of 49,817 has: (5)

- A rate of Childhood Accidents of 144.2 per thousand against the rest of regional Victoria at 66 per thousand and Melbourne at 59.9
- A rate of Psychiatric Hospital Admissions of 13.2 per thousand, more than double that of the rest of regional Victoria, 6.4 per thousand and Melbourne 5.4
- A rate of reported Child Maltreatment of 17.2 cases per 1,000 children compared with Melbourne at 5.2 cases.
- A crime rate against persons that matches that of regional Victoria but generally exceeds that of Melbourne.

Based on demographic data the most populated parts of Mildura (almost all of Merbein Township, large areas of Mildura City and about 50% of Red Cliff's town area are already in need of additional and improved educational and other services - SEIFA Social, Economic

Index for Australia, reveal that of a total of 1474 State Suburbs measured across Victoria, these above mentioned areas, are included in the most disadvantaged decile the second most disadvantaged in Victoria. (*Note SEIFA Disadvantage includes indicators related to people's access to material and social recourses and their ability to participate in their community*)(6)

This high level of socio-economic vulnerability to change is confirmed in a table (Table 17) published by Marsden Jacob (ibid.) p22 which shows that the centres of Balranald, Mildura, Swan Hill and Wentworth were all below the Australian average on the SEIFA scale for 2006.(7)

A recent nationwide study by Catholic Health Australia which represents 75 hospitals and 500 aged care services found that the lowest socio economic group die 3 years earlier than the rest of the nation.

Commenting on the report Father Frank Brennan from the Australian Catholic University says "The idea that the poor die young is not surprising. If you come from a poor dysfunctional family without education of course your health outcomes are going to be worse than if you are from a well-off functional family which has had a good education. (8)

This commentary is relevant for the Mildura communities, especially in the face of the Judith Stubbs report, which quotes "health indicators related to premature and profound or severe disability are slightly more than the average MDB average and much worse than the national situation despite the relative youth of its population". The incidence of premature death in Mildura is slightly higher than the MDB average and much higher than Australia. (9)

It is against this background of factors that by themselves point to low levels of community resilience and high levels of community vulnerability in the face of change, that this submission will now concentrate on what Mallee Family Care views as the most important of

all of the indicators; those of education and employment, both of which are related to human capital, and which are low for the region and again much lower than the averages for metropolitan Melbourne and the rest of Victoria.

This is confirmed by the latest Northern Mallee Local Learning and Employment Network (NMLLEN), Environmental Scan which reveals the following:

- Year 12 or equivalent completion rates for young people for the NMLLEN region are amongst the lowest for the State at 63.4% (2008) when compared with Regional Victoria (73.7%) and Victoria (80%)
- There are relatively high levels of disengagement among young people with 24.8% 15-19 year olds not in education, training or employment compared with Loddon Mallee Region (21.5%) and Victoria (15.4%) (2006, Community Indicators Victoria).

On Track 2009 data for NMLLEN indicates:

- Year 12 completers - fewer go to University (NMLLEN 30.8% Vic 45.6%);  
Fewer go to Cert IV and above (NMLLEN 7.1%, Vic 14.2%) More go into Traineeships (NMLLEN 6.6%, Vic 3.3%);
- More go into full-time employment (NMLLEN 5.25; Vic 4.7%);
- More go into part time employment (NMLLEN 11.2%, Vic 7.7%) and more are looking for work (NMLLEN 5.7%, Vic 3.8%).

Vastly more defer their University studies (NMLLEN 24.3, Vic 12.1%) with the main reason being financial.

For the Early Leavers fewer took up apprenticeships (NMLLEN 20.9% Vic 30.3%); more took up traineeships (NMLLEN 10%, Vic 5.5%); less took up full time employment (NMLLEN 10%, Vic 13%), and more took up employment (NMLLEN 19.1%, Vic 15%) part time.

Analysis of Koori enrolment data for the past 5 years shows there is a marked decline in the number of Koori young people progressing past Year 9. From Year 9 to Year 10 (18.2%); Year 10 to year 11 (42.06%); Year 11 to Year 12 (66.9%) (LLENS data disk, 2010).

The Student Family Occupation Index data indicates that the proportion of students from families whose SFO category is D (Unskilled/Semi Skilled occupations) and N (unemployed) has risen from 32.4% in 2006 to 43.6% in 2009.

VET enrolments at schools are approx 9% of the student cohort (10)

### **3. The Double Jeopardy Impact**

The impacts of this educational underachievement are made doubly disadvantageous, in terms of Mildura's social cohesion, social inclusion and resilience, when it is realised that the lost jobs will be mainly of an unskilled or semi-skilled nature. **Jobs that up to date have been the saving grace for the employment of under-educated workers.**

Typical of these jobs are those under the Wine Industry Award, where an "A Grade 1 employee" has jobs such as "attending packaging equipment" or "performing repetitive tasks such as: binning/debinning unlabelled wines, hand labelling, packing wines and carton making.

These and similar jobs such as "employees performing duties of a manual nature", "performing general labouring duties", "fruit or vegetable picking", or "sorting, packing or grading of produce where this requires the exercise of only minimal judgement" operate under the Horticulture Industry Award (11)

They are unskilled jobs which pay in the vicinity of \$15/16 per hour, and with the addition of a number of semi-skilled light machinery operator occupations, they make up the bulk of the

work in the horticulture industry which in itself, is the largest single employment provider in the region at 19.5% (12)

Further problems for educationally disadvantaged job seekers in the Mildura region are created by a lack of economic diversity in the employment profile. The "Retail" and "Wholesale" sectors provide a further 20% of employment in what is generally considered to be semi-skilled occupations but job growth in these industries is generally dependent on the economic state of agriculture. (13)

Health, which provides 15% of jobs, together with education, professional, public administration and administration are other significant and growing employment sectors but these rely on well educated and highly skilled operatives. Further growth in these industries is likely to be hindered by lack of young people with the necessary educational background or aspirations to take up employment in them.

This indicates that more needs to be done to increase completion rates of Year 12 or its equivalent which involves increasing retention rates at schools. It also means that more needs to be done to raise aspiration levels so that more students are following pathways to higher levels of post compulsory education and training and more needs to be done to re-engage those young people who are disengaged in this region.

The time-scale for action on these adjustments is urgent if we are to effectively maintain social cohesion and social equity

As our Prime Minister recently said "Not only are such unequal chances fundamentally undemocratic, they're economically damaging." (14)

## **4.1 Chances for Children - An Effective Social Experiment**

Mallee Family Care's Chances for Children is a project that is a worthy example of Professor Vinson's idea of the "innovative local projects" mentioned in his recommendation for, "The establishment of flexible funding pools contributed to by all levels of government, to support innovative local projects which address issues of locational disadvantage".

The fund is used to identify what monies are required to "make up the difference", that is to fill the financial gap that prevents a young person from realising their career potential as a consequence of their disadvantaged socio-economic circumstances. In short Chances for Children allows dreams and aspirations to become reality.

The program tailors funding and support differently for each recipient, ensuring that individual needs and circumstances are accounted for. Support given is in accordance with the recipient's family financial capacity. The length of time and level of assistance is reviewed each year, at which time levels could be held, increased or decreased depending on the current financial situation of the recipient. Support continues until the student's educational goals are met.

Strategies are in place for the identification of young people whose opportunities to reach their full potential is constrained by their financial circumstances

Mail-outs to district schools have sought to alert teachers and agencies to the availability of funds that can bridge the gap in terms of children and young people whose families are unable to fully meet that challenge.

Twice a year Chances for Children seeks formal nominations from suitably qualified professionals, and District Selection Panels are invited to make recommendations in respect to the recipients and the form and amount of assistance to be given.

**Importantly, but not exclusively, Chances for Children is about creating opportunities for young people, who have potential for tertiary study, but who are inhibited by the mammoth challenges which confront our youth given the soaring degree of disadvantage, as well as high cost of needing to board in a capital city during the years in which they pursue tertiary education.**

In the 10 years since its inception in 2000, this imaginative project has made it possible for 750 children and young people to receive financial support for sporting endeavours, cultural pursuits or to enter into tertiary study outside the Mallee region. This support is valued at \$2.5m

The value of Chances for Children has been widely recognised and replicated over time in a number of places including Melbourne's western suburbs where it is known as "Western Chances" and when speaking at an Education, Employment and Social Inclusion Symposium in 2008, the current Prime Minister, Julia Gillard said "**This morning I attended a fundraising breakfast for Western Chances, which has given scholarships to more than 1,000 hard working students from the Western suburbs**". The now Prime Minister then added, "This is social inclusion at work." (15)

## **4.2 The Importance of the Early Years**

According to the ABC's AM program (December 3 2010) a recent UNICEF report entitled "Children Left Behind" has found a growing gap between Australia's performance and that of other nations. The report measures how well nations look after their children's health and safety, security, education and socialisation

The program quotes UNICEF's Norman Gillespie as saying "on average, Australia spends almost half of what the OECD countries are doing and yet research shows that emphasis

and focus on the first five years of a child's is so important to all sorts of cognitive and social interactions later in life.(16)

In seeking appropriate strategies to fulfil its aim of improved school retention and educational achievement in the region, Mallee Family Care began to realise the importance of the first few years in the life of a child for promoting healthy physical, emotional, social and intellectual development.

The aim of this project is to build resilience in children through involvement in the learning process from the earliest possible age. The project enables children and their families to positively engage with learning and therefore be better equipped for the transition to school.

Outcomes include:

- Young peoples positive engagement with learning enjoying school both academically and socially with a feeling of belonging and being able to participate fully in school activities and to facilitate the pathways from early learning to kindergarten, to Primary School and from Primary to Secondary.
- Improvement over time in the current numbers of school finishers, to ensure children's wellbeing, their future completion of school and consequently to improve their employment outcomes and the economic social benefits that accompany that. These are economic and social benefits that work for the individual and add to the social fabric of the whole community.

The idea and founding partnership behind what is known as the Total Learning Centre, evolved through a series of conversations between individuals and community-based organisations, including Mallee Family Care and the Mildura Primary School

The principal strategy centres round the linking of primary school to early childhood services.

Families are the primary source of building resilience by providing care, love and intellectual stimulation for young children. Ideally parents and carers are supported by a network of extended family and friends and by a range of support services; however many families in the region are unaware of early childhood support services and school is often the child's first contact with the broader community.

We believe that this kind of integrated initiative improves the opportunities for these children when they become adults, to achieve in both education and employment.

### **4.3 Reading Discovery**

Associated with Mallee Family Care's Total Learning Centre is our Reading Discovery program.

Reading Discovery recognises that children in vulnerable families may have significant language deprivation, which will restrict their future learning potential.

It is an early intervention pre-school program that targets marginalised families in Mallee Family Care's area of operations and parents work as partners in the program

The activities of the program include:

- Home visits
- Organising Playgroups
- Linking people to other agencies
- Information Sessions.

Home visits consist of 1 hour weekly visits to a family's home. During these weekly visits the program's volunteers help parents support their children's learning through reading books,

nursery rhymes, singing and “story-play” an activity that turns story telling into imaginary play. Reading Discovery also incorporates playing out the story with a child.

When related toys are added with open-ended materials such as blocks, we enrich play environments and provide a literary bridge from shared stories, supported by adults, to the child’s dramatic play themes. This aids the development of narrative skills and the generation of creative ideas.

## **5. Education the Vital Key.**

We began this submission by advocating that the Government ensure that any deterioration to community wellbeing and resilience arising from the Murray Darling Plan be promptly offset by effective government sponsored community adaptation measures. We further advocated that positive measures be taken to assist our citizens in overcoming what Professor Tony Vinson in 2008 called a “Web like structure of disadvantage that counters attempts to break free of it” ( 17)

This means that not only community adaptation measures that alleviate the effects of the Murray Darling Plan are required, it also means that urgent action must be taken to halt what is already happening – a vicious cycle of entrenched intergenerational disadvantage.

Mallee Family Care has introduced a number of “innovative local projects” that address issues of local disadvantage “in particular they address issues of educational disadvantage of which a previous Minister for Education, who is now our Prime Minister once said. “Inequality of this sort - which leaves so many people without the capacities to benefit from the knowledge economy - is simply bad economics”.

## **IN Conclusion**

It can be seen from the above that, even without any social effects that might arise in the future from the proposed Murray Darling Basin Plan, the Mildura region does not perform well against national socio-economic indicators

It has a low socio economic status, contributed to by high levels of child maltreatment, high psychiatric admissions, high levels of premature death, comparatively high rates of crime against persons, and high levels of disadvantage as measured by SEIFA scale and in addition its low levels of educational achievement leave the community extremely vulnerable to job losses in unskilled employment.

In addition, Mildura has extremely low levels of educational achievement, and this is doubly unfortunate because it is clear that there is an inevitable link between inadequate education and persistent social disadvantage.

Mallee Family Care has a strong belief in the transformative power of education and we are convinced that Chances for Children, the Total Learning Centre and its associate program Reading Discovery, are valuable local community investments in our children.

However these projects are reliant on raising a lot of money from a comparatively small group of people and we believe that if they are to reach their true community strengthening, potential they will need Government assistance

Professor Tony Vinson's "Dropping off the Edge" is a comprehensive study which shows a wide-spread of social and financial disadvantage distributed across Australia

**Among Vinson's recommendations for alleviating this disadvantage was one that "policy development should not be based on "one size fits all" but targeted**

**towards communities suffering from high levels of disadvantage and containing locally specific measures that might be required to supplement general policy".**

In a more specific recommendation under the heading of "Government Planning and Funding," Vinson proposed the following:

- Integrated planning between all levels of government to address the compounding effects of disadvantage experienced in identified areas;
- The establishment of flexible funding pools contributed to by all levels of government, to support innovative local projects which address issues of locational disadvantage; and
- The shaping of broader measures, especially in education, to meet the needs of communities experiencing a marked concentration of social disadvantage.

Mallee Family Care is of the belief that education is a vital key to community resilience and is highly supportive of Vinson's views.

Our above mentioned projects very precisely fit the Vinson idea of flexible funding pools contributed to by all levels of government, to support innovative local projects which address issues of locational disadvantage with this in mind we are proposing that the Government and the community, through Mallee Family Care, enter into funding partnerships based on Vinson's idea of "flexible funding pools".

A partnership that sets a time scale for the achievement of the Key Tasks and Milestones.

High level support for this proposition came in the words of our current Prime Minister who, when deputy Prime Minister, on August 21 2008, addressed Western Chances (a replication of Chances for Children), said: " What that demonstrates is we can insist on high standards and hard work, and the students of the West can make it to the top.

But we have to create a culture and give them the resources and the support to achieve their best.

The responsibility lies with government.

But governments can't do it without help.

It takes a partnership with people, business and institutions, on the ground locally."

## End Notes

1 Judith Stubbs and Associates – Mildura Rural City Council Case Study, 2010

2 ibid

3 ibid

4 Marsden, Jacob Associates – "Delivering the Basin Plan" 2010

5 Vinson T – Mildura Social Indicators Report, 2008

6 Australian Parliamentary Library –"Research Notes No 2" 2008-9

7 Marsden Jacob – ibid

8 Catholic Health Australia –"Health Lies in Wealth" 2010

9 Judith Stubbs and Associates – ibid

10 Northern Mallee LLEN – "Environmental Scan" 2010

11 Fair Work Australia – Website

12 ABS - "Census of Population and Housing" 2009

13 ABS- ibid

14 Julia Gillard – “Address to Western Chances” 2008

15 J Gillard – ibid

16 UNICEF- “Children Left Behind” as cited by ABC AM 03.12.2010

17 Vinson T – “A Web of Disadvantage” 2007