

Getting Involved in the Country:

Productive ageing in different types of rural communities

December 2010





Australian Government
Department of Health and Ageing

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FOREWORD

Productive ageing recognises the contribution of older people to economic, social and cultural growth and helps build a sustainable community. Being involved in community life is good for individuals and good for society. However, we know very little about the participation and contribution of people aged 50 and over to rural communities.

This research aimed to develop a better understanding of productive ageing in three different types of communities in rural Victoria. It looked at social and civic engagement, familiarity with community, the value placed on social relations by people aged 50 years and over, and how community involvement was linked to community sustainability. In particular it attempts to address the question 'Does social and civic engagement differ across declining, stable and growing rural communities?'

Despite differences among rural communities, this study showed that older people develop and maintain strong community connections and well-functioning social capital and that participation in social activities was connected with feelings of being connected with community. It also identified health issues and lack of options as the main constraints on participation.

A key message for policy makers is that older people play an important role in the sustainability of rural communities. There is much to be gained from actively supporting their participation in activities that are connected to ageing well.

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*The original report is available in full at www.productiveageing.com.au

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INTRODUCTION

Are rural areas good places to grow old?

Many older Australians moving out of the city to begin a new life in the country would probably answer yes – after all, they have voted with their feet. Ask a lifelong resident of a small town where younger people have left to chase work opportunities or education, and the answer may be more equivocal. For a local farmer who has watched the bank, petrol station and post office migrate to bigger regional hubs, fierce loyalty to community may be tempered by the practical frustrations of having to drive further for basic services.

More than one third of the rural Australian population is 65 years of age and older (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW), 2007) yet there are significant gaps in our understanding of the rural ageing experience (Davis & Bartlett, 2008). While urban and rural areas both have ageing populations, older populations are growing at a faster rate in rural areas than in metropolitan centres. This will have a significant effect on the way rural communities operate in the future and put pressure on the formal and informal infrastructure in these communities, which helps support older people to remain active.

In short, we don't really know whether rural Australia is a good place in which to grow old or not.

Rural ageing: a complex picture

Much of what we know about rural ageing comes from urban/rural comparisons, which masks the diversity of the rural ageing experience.

Research shows that baby boomers express a strong desire to remain actively involved in their communities. However, it is unclear how such engagement by current and future older adults will affect those individuals and their communities (Burr, Caro & Moorhead, 2002). This is especially true in the rural context.

Patterns of migration are having a profound effect on rural population ageing. For example, regional Victoria has displayed distinctive age-specific migration patterns. The largest net losses occur in the young adult age groups (20–24 years), with net gains in older age groups. Small to middle-sized country towns in decline have, in the past, provided social networks for farming communities.

However, the decline of these towns and the consequent decline of social networks is likely to increase the incentives to leave these regions in search of more fulfilling social connectedness (Barr, 2005).

Older residents, who have often been the backbone of community groups, may feel the burden of maintaining social infrastructure. While many country towns may face an uncertain economic future, “those living within them will often feel deeply committed to both their town and each other” (Barr, 2005).

While coastal areas are popular as retirement destinations, more recently ‘tree-changers’ (those moving to rural inland areas) have been a small but growing group (Davis & Bartlett, 2008). Specifically, with landscape amenity or specific cultural associations that encourage migration, some small towns will not necessarily experience the slow decline identified previously. For example, in north-east Victoria where there is a more diversified economy and culture, populations tend to be more stable and many small towns in this region have been growing faster than the state as a whole.

The future of many smaller communities may depend on incoming new residents and the ability of the communities to maintain social cohesion (Davis & Bartlett, 2008). How will new and old residents work together, building trust and creating the networks that make for viable communities?

Many regional centres have grown as a direct result of the decline of smaller towns within their region of influence. This has obvious implications for the infrastructure of these smaller communities. Local facilities such as shops, a post office, a bank or public transport are disappearing. So too is valuable social capital when older people retire to larger regional centres or the coast where a wider range of services is accessible – particularly considering that older people donate proportionately more time to voluntary activities than younger generations (Davis & Bartlett, 2008).

Participation in rural communities

It is well known that meaningful community participation contributes to ageing well gracefully, with research linking social participation to quality of life, emotional well-being, functional independence and better health.

Past research has shown that rural areas have significantly higher levels of social networks, greater civic participation and more social cohesion reported when compared with urban areas (Ziersch, Baum, Darmawan, Kavanagh & Bentley, 2009). Various studies have found higher levels of involvement in community organisation, neighbourhood connection and volunteering in rural areas compared with cities (Hughes, Bellamy & Black, 2000; Rozanova, Dosman & de Jong Giervied, 2008).

Rural areas are perceived to have higher levels of social capital as lower population density encourages more interactions between people. However, declining populations and hence, decreasing numbers of volunteers, can have a downside:

“With little potential for replacement, remaining volunteers may feel obliged to maintain or increase their contribution. The degree of need in their communities may lead some rural older adults to volunteer and to contribute more than they wish, or prevent them from freely choosing their activities” (Rozanova et al, 2008).

The sense of satisfaction or fulfilment that comes with many activities may be undermined by obligatory participation or lack of choice in the level of engagement.

THE RESEARCH – LOCATIONS, AIMS, METHODS

Aspects of productive ageing were studied in areas of northern rural Victoria. These areas contain a range of typical landscapes, including the production landscape of the Wimmera-Mallee, the irrigation landscape of the Goulburn-Murray district and the rural amenity landscape of north-east Victoria.

These areas have communities in decline as well as more stable or growing communities. In areas such as the undiversified economy of the Wimmera-Mallee, smaller communities are experiencing declining populations and regional centres are growing. Social networks in smaller towns, once supporting cropping communities, are disappearing, increasing incentives to leave these regions in search of more fulfilling social connectedness. By contrast, in areas such as north-east Victoria, rural amenity has reduced the expansion options of beef farmers due to rising land values, but ensured the social sustainability of most small towns (Barr, 2005). In the Goulburn-Murray irrigation district, competing demands for scarce water may affect the sustainability of some communities. It is unclear how this will affect older people, or how it will influence productive ageing.

Research aims and objectives

The study centred on the research question: “Does social and civic engagement differ across declining, stable and growing rural communities?”

The research aimed to develop a better understanding of productive ageing in different types of communities in rural Victoria. The objectives were:

- To examine the types and levels of social and civic engagement of people aged 50 years and over living in different types of rural communities;
- To investigate social anchorage (years of residence in, and familiarity with, community/ involvement in community) in different types of rural communities by people aged 50 years and over;

- To determine the value placed on social and civic engagement by people aged 50 years and over in different types of rural communities; and
- To explore social and civic engagement in different types of rural communities in relation to community sustainability.

Research methodology

An anonymous self-complete postal questionnaire was chosen for a survey of this size to cover towns over a vast geographic area with the available resources. The questionnaire was developed on the basis of a comprehensive review of the literature.

Twenty towns were selected in northern Victoria, with ten from the north-east region and ten from the north-west region (see Figure 1). These towns were selected to ensure a diversity of rural communities was represented in each region, based on two main characteristics - population size and distance from Melbourne. A variety of different size towns was selected in each region, to ensure comparable towns were selected for each region (see Table 1).

Each region also had its town selection based on distance from Melbourne, with towns classified according to 5 categories. The town selection took into account the need to ensure a similar number of towns from each region were located within 150 kilometres of Melbourne, and in the other four categories of distance (see Table 1).

Figure 1: North-west and North-east Victorian communities surveyed

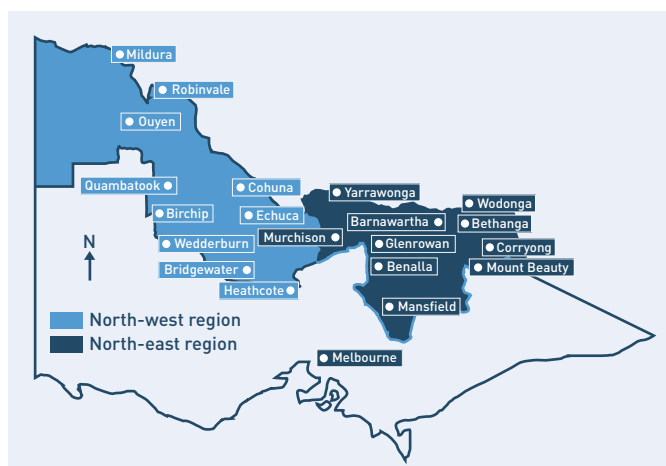


Table 1: Town selection and sampling information

Community	Region	Distance to Melbourne (Kms)	Population Size	% private delivery points sampled	% population 50 years +
Bethanga	NE	250-300	<1,000	100%	36.5%
Glenrowan	NE	150-200	<1,000	100%	34.5%
Barnawartha	NE	200-250	<1,000	100%	28.5%
Murchison	NE	<150	<1,000	100%	37.4%
Corryong	NE	>300	1,000-5,000	60%	44.1%
Mount Beauty	NE	200-250	1,000-5,000	60%	45.0%
Mansfield	NE	<150	1,000-5,000	60%	38.1%
Yarrawonga	NE	200-250	1,000-5,000	60%	44.9%
Benalla	NE	150-200	5,000-15,000	30%	40.3%
Wodonga	NE	250-300	15,000-30,000	20%	32.1%
Quambatook	NW	250-300	<1,000	100%	44.1%
Bridgewater	NW	150-200	<1,000	100%	45.0%
Wedderburn	NW	150-200	<1,000	100%	45.1%
Birchip	NW	250-300	<1,000	100%	45.4%
Ouyen	NW	>300	1,000-5,000	60%	43.6%
Heathcote	NW	<150	1,000-5,000	60%	53.2%
Cohuna	NW	200-250	1,000-5,000	60%	45.4%
Robinvale	NW	>300	1,000-5,000	60%	30.9%
Echuca	NW	150-200	5,000-15,000	30%	45.7%
Mildura	NW	>300	15,000-30,000	20%	31.5%

Demographic profile

From 20,000 surveys sent out, 4,003 were returned, with 3,925 of these included for analysis. Table 2 shows the demographic profile of the respondents. In comparison with the general population of Victoria, females were over-represented in the sample. Over half the respondents live in medium size towns (between 1,000 and 5,000 residents).

The communities in this study were identified as having stable, growing or declining populations. 54.4% of respondents were living in communities identified as 'growing', 23.3% were from 'stable' communities and 22.3% were living in 'declining' communities. Just over half of the respondents from small towns in this study lived in stable communities, while the rest lived in small towns that have declining populations, especially in north-west Victoria. None of the small towns in this study are 'growing', but over 60% of the respondents living in medium and large towns were from growing communities.

15.6% of the survey respondents lived on a farm or rural property, and nearly half of these were near communities with stable populations.

HOW DO OLDER PEOPLE SEE THEIR OWN COMMUNITY?

How connected did respondents feel to their local community? Social connectedness reflects aspects of residence. These include length of residence, town size and whether the population is growing or declining.

Across all respondents, around one in six was a lifetime resident but this increased to one in five for those living on rural properties or farms. One in four (26%) respondents from communities with declining populations was a lifetime resident compared with 13% for both stable and growing communities.

Table 2: Respondent characteristics

Gender	
Male	38.3%
Female	61.7%
Age	
50-54	18.5%
55-59	17.0%
60-64	17.5%
65-69	15.6%
70-74	12.6%
75-79	9.0%
80-84	6.1%
85+	3.5%
Perceived Health Status	
Generally good	67.9%
Generally fair	14.7%
Generally poor	6.8%
Sometimes good/sometimes poor	10.6%
Perceived Financial Status	
Well-off	3.9%
Comfortable	69.3%
Struggling	26.7%
Major Source of Income	
Employment	25.5%
Business/farm	10.1%
Self-funded retiree	15.9%
Pension	40.8%
Other	7.7%
Location	
Small town	16.6%
Medium Town	52.4%
Large town	23.0%
Regional Centre	8.0%
Area of Victoria	
North-east	51.7%
North-west	48.4%

The average length of residence¹ was higher in declining communities (26.4 years) compared to growing (22 years) and stable communities (19.8 years). More communities in the north-west region of Victoria in this study had average length of residence exceeding 25 years, which is not surprising given patterns of out-migration from the production and irrigation landscapes making up this area.

38.8% had made the 'tree-change', moving to their current community from metropolitan areas (nearly two thirds of which took up residence in the north-east area, noted for its attractive environment). The same percentage had moved from small rural towns or other rural areas.

Participants were asked what percent of the population they knew personally. 40% reported knowing less than 10%, while 22% said they knew more than half of the people living in the community. Those knowing at least half of community members had lived in the locality for an average of 30 years or more. More than a third of farmers and those living on rural properties report knowing more than half of the community population. Those knowing more than half of the people in their community are more likely to be living in a declining community.

Views on community life

Most people felt that their fellow community residents would identify with a high quality of life, and the vast majority were satisfied with their current living situations.

The majority of people were satisfied with their local community, felt safe, believed people in the local community can be trusted and felt they were part of the community. Most agreed that their community felt like home.

While the majority of people agreed that it was important to have new people coming to live in the community, a higher percentage of those in declining communities considered new people important.

Nearly half of all respondents felt that their community was friendly and supportive all of the time and nearly the same number of people felt that the community was friendly and supportive sometimes. There were mixed opinions around whether people looked out mainly for the welfare of their own family and they were not really concerned with community welfare. Overall though, 87.9% said that most people in their community were willing to help if it was needed, as illustrated by one survey participant:

"I lost my wife 3 months ago and my local community was a great support. We received many cards with kind words, numerous phone calls, visitors and cakes. The locals just took over the kitchen on the day of the funeral and ensured everyone was fed and had a cup of tea. Since then, people have still dropped in to check up on me. It's in times of crisis that neighbours become friends."

In terms of what goes on in the community and how residents participate, the majority agreed that a small group of residents are involved in lots of different things that help the community (80.6%) but that there are different people involved depending on the issue, event or area of need. In essence, community leadership was seen by many as the 'domain of the few':

"There is a need for a more diverse range of people and opinions to lead our community – the same small sample of people always bob up in the leadership roles. As a consequence of this, the potential for growth and expansion of our community has been hindered."

¹Excluding lifetime residents.

This notion of a narrow range of opinions guiding the communities was also reflected in people's perceptions of how community action occurred. Most respondents detected an authoritarian approach some or all of the time where leaders in the community decide on a plan of action. Local councils were seen as particularly dictatorial:

"A few leaders think they know best and enforce their views on others."

"Council and politicians do what they want."

"Council gets a grant from state, tells a consultant what they want. Lo and behold the consultant recommends what they want."

Nevertheless, there was recognition that some residents do participate, by organising meetings, contacting local councils or politicians or sharing information through local newsletters.

There was a sense that community consultation did occur, but the majority of comments indicate that this was seen as tokenistic:

"Consultation may occur but one feels that in general a decision/action was already formulated, therefore community impact (assessed) just to satisfy requirements."

What does this mean for community connectedness?

Although a small percentage of lifetime residents make up the populations of the rural communities in this study, the communities in both the north-east and north-west do have more than one third of their older population who have moved from urban centres. Of those who were not lifetime residents, just over half had lived in their current community for more than 20 years. As length of residence underpins an individual's familiarity with and connections to the local community, it is a significant feature of these communities that long term residence is common.

Despite some feelings of powerlessness, the experiences and perceptions of the majority of people living in rural northern Victoria suggest a strong foundation of social connectedness. Of particular interest is that on the whole, social connectedness appears to be even stronger in declining communities where residents felt safe, felt that they belonged and that people were willing to help if it was needed.

Types and levels of social, civic and community involvement

How do these general characteristics of residence and community translate into active participation?

The study measured activities that take in the types and levels of participation across six categories:

- informal social participation;
- social participation through activities in public spaces;
- social participation through group activities;
- civic activity undertaken on an individual basis;
- group civic activity, and;
- community group participation.

The frequency of participation for each activity was measured to provide an aggregate score for each category, with higher scores denoting higher levels of participation.

Social participation was the most common type of regular activity in which rural older people were involved, with informal social involvement attracting by far the highest levels of participation. Very low levels of civic involvement were evident, but community group involvement scored on par or even higher than social involvement in groups.

The results reflect common patterns found in previous research of urban and rural populations (Baum et al, 2000). Participation was influenced by gender, level of education, financial and health

status, and age. Those reporting good health have higher participation rates, but fluctuating health (sometimes good, sometimes poor) seems to have a more negative impact on informal social involvement than poor health. Women have higher rates of participation than men in all types of social involvement and in community involvement, but men are more likely to be involved in individual civic activity.

While there are no significant age group differences for informal social involvement, those 70-79 years of age are more likely to be involved in public and group social activities. People 80 years of age and over maintain higher levels of community involvement than other age groups.

Declining communities have significantly higher rates of participation in group civic involvement and community involvement. People in growing communities are more likely to be socially active in public spaces.

While this provides an overview of the broad categories of the activity of older people in rural communities, a closer look at each type of involvement gives a better understanding.

Informal social participation

Table 3 shows the percentage of respondents regularly engaged in the various types of informal social participation for specific demographic and individual characteristics. Overall, 68% of survey respondents reported visiting friends or friends visiting them at least twice a month or once a week, and 14.2% seldom or never visited friends.

60.6% frequently engaged with family and slightly less acknowledged regular contact with neighbours (57.2%) over the past year. Nearly one quarter of respondents said that they only occasionally visit with family and just over one quarter seldom or never visit with neighbours.

Women are more likely to visit frequently with family and friends, as are those who consider themselves to be 'well off' financially. Respondents over 60 were more likely to have visited neighbours frequently but age was not associated with visiting friends or family. Those with lower levels of education were less likely to visit with friends and neighbours. Perceived financial status was also associated with levels of social involvement. Those who are struggling financially are less likely to visit with family, friends and neighbours.

Table 3: Per cent of study population involved in regular, frequent informal social activities by demographic and individual characteristic

Demographics/ Characteristics	Visited family % (n)	Visited friends % (n)	Visited neighbours % (n)
Gender			
Men	54.2% (779)	63.3% (913)	56.1% (806)
Women	64.8% (1506)	71.2% (1660)	58.0% (1347)
Age			
50-59	61.0% (822)	67.5% (908)	53.2% (714)
60-69	61.6% (771)	70.5% (884)	59.1% (737)
70-79	59.5% (481)	68.4% (554)	60.1% (485)
80+	61.0% (214)	63.6% (231)	59.8% (217)
Level of Education			
Low	63.9% (843)	64.8% (856)	53.7% (706)
Medium	62.3% (651)	70.4% (736)	60.3% (631)
High	58.2% (514)	70.8% (628)	56.9% (500)
P value	.009	.000	.000
Perceived Health Status			
Poor	62.1% (162)	62.5% (163)	54.0% (141)
Fair	61.1% (348)	63.7% (362)	53.4% (302)
Good	62.2% (1614)	70.2% (1830)	58.7% (1523)
Sometimes good/ sometimes poor	48.6% (197)	62.7% (254)	56.0% (228)
Perceived Financial Status			
Struggling	58.0% (585)	61.0% (617)	51.5% (519)
Comfortable	61.1% (1588)	70.6% (1840)	59.3% (1543)
Well-off	69.3% (104)	78.7% (118)	65.8% (96)
Size of Location			
Small town	61.4% (391)	65.5% (422)	58.6% (374)
Medium town	60.1% (1210)	67.5% (1368)	59.2% (1195)
Large town	59.1% (524)	69.1% (609)	51.8% (457)
Regional centre	66.2% (204)	73.0% (222)	57.6% (174)
Farm/rural property	65.5% (388)	64.2% (381)	55.3% (327)

Social participation: activities in public spaces

The research showed that social clubs and going to a café or restaurant were the most common types of social activity in public spaces with nearly half of the respondents reporting regular or frequent participation.

However, the levels of participation for this type of activity varied according to demographic characteristics, with significant differences for gender, age, education, perceived health, perceived financial status and location. Those 70 and older reported more frequent participation in social clubs (70-79: 60.3%, 80+: 59%) but this was not the case for the other types of social participation in public places. More women than men reported frequent activity across the different types of public social involvement. Those struggling financially were less likely to be involved in social participation in public places.

More people living in medium size locations reported regular engagement with social clubs whereas those in regional centres were more likely to be going to a café or restaurant frequently. This was also the only activity where a significant difference was identified between the areas of Victoria with a higher percentage of people in the north-east reporting going to a café or restaurant on a regular basis. Such differences are likely to reflect the availability of services in different types of communities.

Social participation: group activities

Group activities play a much smaller role in the social lives of people 50 years of age and older living in rural northern Victoria than other forms of social participation. Playing sport is the most common form of regular group activity for 30.3% of respondents. Around one in five said that they regularly participated in a gym or exercise class. More of those in the 70 plus age groups reported playing sport frequently compared to the 50-69 age groups. Of particular interest is that 37.5% of those 80 years of age and over reported being involved regularly in playing sports.

Men were more likely to play sport and women were more likely to be involved in all other types of activity in this category. A higher level of education is associated with social group involvement.

The researchers asked about activities relating to a specific group of friends. Belonging to a group of friends that do things together (e.g. play cards, go on holiday, attend events) was reported as a current activity by just over half of all respondents. Those over 70 years of age, those with a higher level of education, good health and a stronger financial position had higher participation rates in these activities.

Participation in civic activity as an individual

Very few people reported regular, frequent involvement in individual civic activity. However, 53.7% reported signing a petition once or twice in the past 12 months. Just over a quarter of respondents had contacted their local councillor and one in five had written to the council once or twice in the past year. Those reporting some level of participation were more likely to be women, more likely to live in small or large towns and surrounding areas, and more likely to be under the age of 70. Individual civic involvement for those living on farms or rural properties was almost non-existent.

Civic participation involving group activity

Very few respondents reported regular, frequent participation in civic group activities. However, one fifth reported being involved in a campaign or action group to improve the social environment or community conditions in the past year and 14.6% were involved in a community action or committee once or twice over the same time period.

Men and those with higher levels of education were more likely to participate in service clubs, campaigns or action groups and community action or committees. Such activity was more likely in declining communities.

Participation in community groups

Community groups attract a higher level of regular involvement than individual or group civic activities. One third of respondents engaged frequently in some form of volunteer group, with others involved occasionally. A quarter of respondents attended church regularly and 17.2% were involved in service club activities over the past year. Community group involvement (through volunteer groups, church and service clubs) was also more popular with those living on farms and rural properties. Overall, those who are over the age of 70 have higher rates of participation in community groups.

Rural people aged 50 and older were more likely to be involved in a volunteer group if their community population was declining compared with people of similar age in a stable or growing community. Women, those aged between 60 and 79 and those with higher levels of education are more likely to report frequent volunteer group participation. As one respondent noted:

“I have found that the people who mostly care for others and volunteer are in the 60-80 year old group, examples are Church, Meals on Wheels, Lions and Probus clubs. The local CFA needs new members. They have a great junior membership but most young people have to move away after finishing school so these potential renewable members are lost. The local Lions club members are in the 60-80 year old group.”

Community connectedness and types of participation

A strong culture of volunteering, high levels of trust and reciprocity, people looking after one another, a range of organised groups for people to join and get together and effective service networks are all indicators of a connected community. While the latter may not be present in all the communities in our study, community connectedness is clearly evident across the other indicators.

Those who participated most had positive views of their community, felt they belonged and liked where they lived. There was also a relationship between length of residence in a community and levels of informal social involvement and community group involvement.

Nevertheless, participation was influenced by the life course and changing circumstances, despite long-standing residence. For example, although few in the study were still involved in school-related groups, many indicated that this had changed over time, as the following suggests:

“Participating in the community was easier when the children were still at home and we belonged to school council/ sports clubs/ pre-school committee/ scout group/ and service club. We participated on all and were committee members on all of these groups for many years. However, with our children leaving and working in Melbourne, and all their friends, many of our community friends moved to be nearer their children. The links that were forged over a period of time have gone.”

A plea for participation

While most people felt they spent the right amount of time visiting with family, friends and neighbours (78%), fewer were happy with the amount of time they spent engaged in social activity in public places and group activities such as sport, classes or music groups:

“I am on the verge of retiring and my children have all just left home. I really want to contribute to the community but I find it difficult to find out which organisation would use my particular talents well. Up until now I have been dedicated to my children and job, just helping out with youth groups and sporting groups attended by my children. There has been a gap between my involvement because of children and now.”

Although civic participation rates were very low, 40% of respondents believed they do not spend enough time engaged in both individual and group civic activities. Of this group, two thirds would like to increase their participation in these areas in the next 12 months. For the most popular group civic activities (being involved in a campaign, group or action to improve the social environment or community conditions), those most actively involved intend to keep contributing, while those less involved are unlikely to become more active.

Given that community group participation rates are higher than civic involvement, it is not surprising that 68.4% are content with the time they spend involved with volunteer groups, service clubs and attending church etc. Nevertheless, of those who report they do not spend enough time engaged in community group activities, 43.6% would like to increase their involvement in the next 12 months.

“I have skills that I could give back to the community on retirement. I would like to work with Lifeline or Meals on Wheels. Most of my life I have been with some sort of voluntary organisation but now I am in my fifties, I just manage to work and I can't do both. I am looking forward to giving back when retired.”

Why get involved?

Enjoyment was the most common reason for being involved in the different associations, groups and activities (87.1%), followed by wanting to give something back to the community (71.8%) and wanting to give it a try or learn how to do it (68.1%). Those who enjoyed participating, who wanted to give it a try and who felt they wanted to give something back to the community had higher levels of participation in all types of activities.

About a quarter of survey respondents reported that they got involved because of a series of coincidences or unexpected connections or because they felt lonely and decided to do something about it. About 12% of survey respondents felt obliged or forced to get involved, but now enjoy it and 6.9% of survey respondents felt obliged or forced to do it and don't know how to get out of it.

In this study, enjoyment in particular underpinned participation for those who were over the age of 80 and those who had a higher level of education. Respondents who were struggling financially, female, over the age of 80, in poor health or with low education were more likely to be involved because they felt lonely.

HOW PARTICIPATION IS VALUED

It is clear that the higher the level of involvement in community, the more value was placed on participation. Table 4 illustrates this, displaying the average ratio level of involvement by the type of participation. The higher the score, the higher the participation was valued.

While 93% of rural older people in the study placed significant value on being involved with their family, friends and neighbours, fewer than two thirds placed a similar value on social involvement in public spaces and in group activities.

People between 50 and 59 years old were more likely to value being involved in social clubs and going to restaurants, the theatre and other public places and in group social activities such as sport, attending classes etc.

Table 4: Value of participation by level and type

Type of participation	Ratio of level of participation	
	Good value	No value
Informal social involvement	.7633	.5417
Social involvement in public space	.5530	.3584
Social involvement in groups	.3861	.2587
Individual civic involvement	.2844	.2299
Group civic involvement	.3815	.2641
Community group involvement	.4356	.2572

The research revealed that women place a higher value on all types of involvement, as do those with a higher level of education:

“My mum (father deceased when I was 6 years old) taught me values of life and to learn and help others. I have told my children and in turn I hope it will be passed on down through generations. Good deeds, friendships, trust, learning, and advice makes me a better person and gives me a feeling of achievement in my life.”

These are the words of a female aged between 55 – 59 years of age, in good health, with some post-secondary education and living in a growing community. Her comments echo the sentiments of many of the respondents in the study.

Given the low levels of civic involvement found in the study, it is not surprising that few respondents placed any significant value on such activities (21%).

Nearly two thirds of respondents highly valued community involvement. Women, 80 years of age and older, with a low level of education and fluctuating health, living in a household that is struggling financially, are more likely to place high value on community group involvement.

Perceived benefits of participation

As Table 5 illustrates, the most common benefits reported from being involved related to social engagement and productive activities.

Table 5: Benefits of participation

Type of benefit	% agree
Friendship & social interaction	85.7%
Keeps me active	84.5%
Like getting things done	83.3%
Mixing with people interested in similar activities, hobbies	83.9%
Want to make a contribution to the community	77.5%
Feeling of solidarity, security, community	71.1%
Know I am filling a need for a specific service	70.3%
Something to do with my life	66.0%
Connections with someone to rely on	56.0%
Gain community respect	49.9%

Limits to participation

72% of all respondents identified limitations that impact on their ability to participate in social, civic and community activities. Of these, the most common was health issues (23%) followed by a lack of options and opportunities (16%). Some people had multiple constraints.

Of the other barriers to participation identified by respondents, two themes dominated: lack of time due to work or family/carer commitments, and financial considerations, particularly as a result of drought. The effect of the drought should not be underestimated:

“During this prolonged drought, the time I have to attend anything has decreased. I used to be involved in a women’s group that had social functions once a month. But haven’t attended for two years. I played indoor tennis. That has finished too. Because of limited money to pay outside help, I now have to work full time on the farm.”

Trust, reciprocity and sustainable communities

Both trust and reciprocity are important to understanding social capital. The capacity of a community to respond to change, and hence be sustainable, is largely determined by the levels and types of social capital.

Levels of trust

Trust has been described as the “critical component of any social cohesion” (Falk and Kilpatrick, 2000). The researchers asked questions relevant to three types of trust (as identified by Stone 2001):

- Generalised trust which is extended to strangers, often on the basis of expectations of behaviour or a sense of shared values;
- Particularised or personalised trust exists within established relationships and social networks;
- Civic or institutional trust referring to a basic trust in formal institutions of governance including fairness of rules, official procedures, dispute resolution and resource allocation.

Over three quarters (77.6%) of survey respondents believe that generally speaking, most people in the local community can be trusted. A majority reported that they trust relatives both within and outside their community. Most people trusted their friends and neighbours. However, there was a significant lack of institutional trust expressed by rural people 50 years of age and over.

Over half of all survey respondents rarely or never trust political parties (68.1%), the state government (64.4%), the federal government (58.9%), politicians (57.9%) and public servants (53.6%). Only 2.3%, 2.8% and 3.1% always trust political parties, the state government and the federal government respectively.

Almost half of survey respondents rarely or never trusted local councillors and even more did not trust tradespeople outside of the community (52.2%). However, 46.7% always trusted the police and 38.9% always trusted ministers of religion.

Reciprocity

Reciprocity is a process of exchange within social relationships (Stone, 2001). What is often overlooked is that older people frequently provide social support as well as receive it. With 91.2% of all respondents believing that by helping others you help yourself in the long run, it is hardly surprising that reciprocity is common in northern rural Victoria.

Table 6 shows the percentage of those indicating that they receive and provide assistance. Listening to problems, helping with odd jobs, lending tools and equipment, caring for a friend or neighbours' home and pets in their absence and caring for a family member are the most common types of assistance provided. Similarly, these are largely the most common forms of assistance received.

Table 6: Assistance provided and received from neighbours/friends

Activity	% Received	% Provided
Listen to problems	70.0	92.2
Help with odd jobs	59.8	80.3
Lend household equipment/tools	44.3	72.1
Care for house/pets while away	58.0	66.9
Assisted with shopping	18.1	38.9
Care for family member	18.8	53.1
Lend money	5.3	30.9

Social participation

The need to develop networks and trust at the local level is essential to regeneration and revitalisation. Broadly, as table 7 shows, those who agree that most people can be trusted do have higher participation rates across all types of activities.

Table 7: Participation ratios across types of activities for 'generalised trusters'

Type of community participation	Type of community participation	
	Truster	Non-truster
Informal social involvement	.7662	.6933
Social involvement in public spaces	.5214	.4371
Social involvement in groups	.3526	.3055
Individual civic involvement	.2533	.2407
Group civic involvement	.3137	.2700
Community group involvement	.3933	.3535

It has been pointed out that when 'particularised trusters' do participate, they tend to concentrate their efforts on people who belong to the community with which they identify (Ulsaner and Conley, 2003). They shy away from wide-ranging civic engagement and are more likely to see the world in terms of 'we' and 'they'. This means that newcomers or outsiders can feel excluded, as some respondents commented:

“As an outsider, “newcomers” are not welcome unless a financial contribution can be made into your interest area. The town is wary of “strangers” and as an “older age” town established people hang on to their petty positions of power and influence. The town is dominated by old ideas and people do not want change. Bigoted and racist attitudes prevail.”

“This is a very closed, insulated and isolated community. They do not welcome new people and stick to their own. Unless you play football, you feel you have no right to live in this community.”

Yet there is a foundation of trust, reciprocity and participation on which to build. A strong culture of volunteering, high levels of trust and reciprocity, people who look after one another, a range of organised groups for people to join and get together are all indicators of a connected community.

DISCUSSION AND SUMMARY

As research continues to explore rural ageing, simplistic views of rural life are beginning to break down and there is an increasing understanding of the variety of ‘places’. This study adds a piece to the puzzle. The snapshot of the participation of people 50 years of age and older living in different types of rural communities provides insight into the way rural older people engage in their communities. It tells us how they participate, what they value and what stops them getting involved.

It is a robust story being told by people 50 years of age and older living in those rural communities - a story that presents a vivid picture of productive ageing and the role of older people in the sustainability of their communities.

This study shows that there is a significant proportion of long term older residents who moved into their current community more than 20 years ago, as well as a smaller number of life-long residents. As might be anticipated, these residents have slightly higher levels of informal social participation and community group participation than others. They feel an attachment to their place. In northern rural Victoria, despite some feelings of powerlessness, which may stem from a lack of institutional trust, there is a strong foundation

of social connectedness, particularly in small, declining communities. Here, more people felt that they belonged, had a sense of trust, felt safe, and believed that people were willing to help if needed. Most were satisfied with their community and did not want to move. If people feel safe, happy and secure, they will work together to organise and interact to build a stronger community.

Social participation, particularly with family, friends and neighbours, was found to be the most common form of involvement, which is highly valued. Community group involvement was also common, attracting strong participation from those 50 years of age and older. There were very low levels of civic participation of any kind. However, the majority would like to increase their time spent in group civic involvement in particular. The 50-64 year old group, or baby boomers, may well increase their civic involvement in later years when work and family commitments diminish. Support and encouragement would help.

Gender, age and level of education also influence the type and level of participation in rural areas. Women are more likely to be regularly involved in social activity and in volunteer groups. Playing sport is a social activity favoured by men, perhaps reflecting the fact that lawn bowls is big in the country. Men are more likely to participate in individual and group civic involvement; in particular service clubs, campaigns or actions to improve community conditions and contacting their local councillor. The influence of age is not as uniform but nevertheless clear patterns emerge. Those under 70 are more likely to be involved in community action groups or committees as well as contacting local councillors, whereas service clubs are a frequent activity of the over 70 age group.

Higher levels of community group involvement and group civic involvement were found in declining communities. Rather than some sense of obligation, the most common reasons for involvement were enjoyment, wanting to give something back to the community and wanting to try new things. The majority are choosing to participate on the basis of what they enjoy and what has meaning for them.

An important finding in the study was the impact of limitations on participation, with 72% of respondents identifying limitations that reduced their ability to get involved. Health issues and lack of options were the main constraints. Interestingly, the impact of limitations on participation were more evident in those 50 to 64 years of age than those aged 65 and over for most types of social, group civic and community involvement. Despite the limitations, more of the older group were frequently involved in visiting friends and neighbours, active in social clubs, hobby groups, playing sport, in service clubs, campaign activity and attending church.

Helping others has been shown to improve the well-being of the helper and the helped (Fast and de Jong Gierveld, 2008). There was strong reciprocity in the communities studied, with help received from neighbours and friends, help with odd jobs, shopping and caring, listening to problems and the like. This kind of help increased with age and limitations.

This study showed that older people in the country participated strongly in activities that have been connected to ageing well. Participation in these activities, in turn was connected with more intense feelings of being connected with community.

Implications

Productive ageing and the sustainability of rural communities goes hand in hand. While the great diversity in the rural communities in northern Victoria means opportunities for involvement vary, it appears that rural older people play a significant role in rural communities. Although civic involvement is low, the majority of older people living in rural communities continue to be involved in a range of social and community group activities even in very old age, despite limitations. Group membership is common, and reciprocity an integral part of community life. There are good levels of social and community group involvement, and a foundation of civic activity on which to build, all of which bodes well for community sustainability.

The baby boomers in this study are actively involved in all types of social, civic and community involvement in rural communities, and many indicate that they are keen to increase their

involvement when family and work commitments lessen over time. The majority of this younger age group have no more intention to move than those 65 years of age and older. This is good news for rural community sustainability.

However, policy makers at all levels of government will need to carefully consider ways in which to support older people to continue to do what they are already doing, particularly in declining communities.

Such support might begin with asking questions such as:

Are there enough facilities available to allow older people to keep active?

Given the importance of health in allowing people to get involved, are health services suitable and available in all the areas?

Could transport options be improved to encourage more participation, particularly for those living out of town?

Is enough attention being paid to the social impacts of drought?

Are there better ways to link volunteer groups, so that these contributions can be more effective and sustainable?

How does present and future availability to use technology by residents in rural areas influence active participation in the community?

For those who want to 'give back' to their communities when time and circumstances permit, could more formal avenues be established, such as local registers of skilled retirees willing to help?

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ABOUT THE NATIONAL SENIORS PRODUCTIVE AGEING CENTRE

The National Seniors Productive Ageing Centre is an initiative of National Seniors Australia and the Department of Health and Ageing. The Centre's aim is to advance knowledge and understanding of all aspects of productive ageing to improve the quality of life of people aged 50 and over.

The Centre's key objectives are to:

- Support quality consumer oriented research informed by the experience of people aged 50 years and over;
- Inform Government, business and the community on productive ageing across the life-course;
- Raise awareness of research findings which are useful for older people; and
- Be a leading centre for research, education and information on productive ageing in Australia.

For more information about the Productive Ageing Centre, visit www.productiveageing.com.au or call 02 6230 4588.



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