

Issues, Opportunities and Some Ways Forward Based on Experiences in Rural and Regional Communities

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Introduction

Social and economic changes are transforming rural and regional Australia. How communities deal with these changes depends on access to services, economic development and infrastructure. However, vibrant communities also rely on local people using assets in new ways, working cooperatively, improving networks, mobilising existing skills, and putting innovative ideas into action. The outcomes are not only jobs, income and infrastructure but also strong functioning communities, better able to manage change. While communities can't live on enthusiasm alone, the commitment and motivation of local people, small visible successes, inventiveness and cooperation are crucial to local development.

To what extent then, are communities fostering innovation, developing new economic opportunities, supporting “drivers” and helping turn passion into action? The answer is mixed. Many communities have built networks, fostered local innovation and developed substantial capability and have turned this into very real economic and social benefits. Yet major challenges remain for many communities.

What then are the key challenges and opportunities for rural and regional communities? How might local people, industry and government address these issues? What would support community people in “rethinking” assets, developing networks, building local cooperation and fostering local development?

These are sweeping questions with complex answers. Much relies on balancing dilemmas and compromise. Yet this paper aims to give some insights into some of the key ways in which communities can progress. Rather than providing a comprehensive overview, the paper highlights some key issues and challenges. It discusses some of the leverage points for communities that have emerged from recent experiences across Australia.

What Makes a Vibrant Community?

Community development fundamentally involves a series of actions and decisions that improves the situation of a community, not just economically, but as a strong functioning community. It is through action, participation and contact that a community becomes more vital. This relies on strong networks, organisational ability, skills, leadership and motivation.

Fundamentally, development is the creation of “wealth” – wealth being the things that people value (Shaffer, 1989). Development involves ongoing economic, social and environmental improvement - sustaining a desirable environment; having a vital social system that fosters collaboration and equity; and a vital economy that is diverse and accessible (Christenson et.al., 1989). Development increases choices, sustains positive attitudes, improves the function of social institutions, and enhances quality of life.

Development in rural and regional Australia depends on several interdependent components. First, adequate infrastructure is needed to support communities and economic activity. Second, economic development involves new business starts, access to venture capital, improving the efficiency of existing firms or the establishment of new industries or enterprises. Third, policy settings can help position rural and regional areas, in an economically competitive, socially just, and environmentally responsible position.

Indeed, investment in infrastructure or major business development can transform local economies. But lasting development also depends on community ownership, action, rethinking and motivation. Indeed, the “concrete” benefits of community development, such as employment and infrastructure, often come through local people changing attitudes, mobilising existing skills, improving networks, thinking differently about problems, and using community assets in new ways. Indeed, the effectiveness of major infrastructure investment can depend on how well communities can cooperatively use the resource.

Community development is often a difficult set of relationships and processes for citizens to build and maintain. A range of “ingredients” are needed to stimulate and foster development activities as follows (adapted from Shaffer, 1989):

- A slight level of dissatisfaction: motivation and enthusiasm based on a feeling that things could be better.
- Belief and expectation of self-help: a belief in the future of the community and a conviction that it will depend on the action of community members for the future to be realised.
- Local Leadership: formal and informal leaders who can enthuse and support others, foster shared leadership, accept criticism, and act as local champions for community development efforts.
- Collaboration: a strong culture of cooperation and participation.
- Willingness to experiment and take advantage of opportunities.
- Cultivation of allies: actively seek, inform, and network with outside supporters.
- Working hard and staying with the process, especially when there is a setback.
- Focus on specific actions without losing sight of experimental ideas.

What then are the issues and opportunities for communities to become more economically sustainable and more functional?

Issues

When I look across rural Australia there are many effective communities adapting to change and implementing community-led initiatives. Yet I also see many communities struggling to take action. Some community-based initiatives cease after external funding finishes. I see large investments of community effort in planning and prioritisation meeting barriers when it comes to implementation. Local community leaders are “burning out” and finding it difficult to foster broader participation and shared vision. While adequate resourcing is crucial, the funding “chase” can take on its own importance.

The successes in communities, as well as the struggles, illustrate some key issues for community development. Many of these issues are questions of balance and trade off.

Enthusiasm and fatigue

Enthusiasm and commitment are crucial to economic and community development. Many communities are being transformed by the commitment of local people leading to action. Yet many motivated people are becoming fatigued and are finding it difficult to maintain passion for community effort. A combination of factors such as increasing regularly requirements, insurance issues, difficulty in attracting volunteers, and the ongoing need to access resources are increasing pressure on local motivation and enthusiasm.

Services and Development

Assessing needs and delivering services and infrastructure to meet needs is a crucial role for government and community support agencies. Yet the delivery of services alone may not stimulate people to work collaboratively, to redefine assets and explore new economic options. The dilemma is to not only deliver services and support, but also to engage communities in “rethinking” apparent problems, investigating how they can use existing skills and resources, and fostering local motivation.

Deliberation

Avenues for community members to deliberate issues are fundamental to discovering new options and developing collaborative effort. Yet I contend that many communities do not have good arrangements for deliberation. Local power arrangements, traditional approaches to community engagement and difficulties in managing conflict can easily limit inclusive and constructive deliberation.

Participation

A vibrant community depends on active and broad participation. However, pressures on people’s ability to participate in their community are building. Traditional forms of participation are attracting fewer people and people are tending to participate more in

events than in organisations. The incentives and often subtle barriers to participation can easily narrow the spectrum of community members that are involved in their community.

New priorities but old assumptions

The future of rural communities has become an important national priority and many community members and support agencies are focusing strongly on addressing community vitality. However, there is a danger of approaching the complex issues involved with “old” assumptions, such as retaining close to sole focus on infrastructure investment, attracting new export employers or providing greater services. Clearly these approaches are important, but they need to be accompanied by effort that fosters innovation, new income streams in communities, bringing existing resources together in new ways and in redefining assets.

Continuity

Community development is a long term process that requires a continuity of focus and effort. Yet many resourcing arrangements, demands on community leaders, and performance measures often don’t lend themselves to ongoing sustainability and long term change. Greater innovation in funding options and partnerships, and in performance measurement are required to foster long term continuity.

Coordination

Many initiatives or structures that support community development are necessarily delineated into topics such as job creation, or towards particular areas of expertise such as education or natural resource management. This is an efficient and clear way to deliver community support. However, the diverse nature of community development necessarily demands coordination across programs and topic areas. Programs clearly need to be targeted to specific issues, but they require a more coordinated framework. Rather than bolstering formal coordination structures, programs and services can be well coordinated within informal rural development networks that function well at the regional level.

Access and dissemination

Community development agencies and initiatives clearly need to disseminate information and services. Yet, it can be a strong assumption that communities can access them easily and that they are meaningful and appropriate for communities.

Development agencies need to continue to partner communities to help them gain access to services and information. This means training, coaching and working with community groups to help them access appropriate information and help them improve their capacity to navigate the broad array of services available.

How then might communities and agencies better balance these issues? What are the opportunities for communities to continue to move forward?

Opportunities

A range of opportunities have become apparent from experiences in communities across a number of states. Some key options are refocusing on “the basics” of community development, multi-community collaboration, changes in government, new business opportunities, new approaches to community engagement, and arrangements to support continuity.

The Basics

Some of the long established fundamentals of community development can help communities manage current dilemmas. Maintaining debate and focus on the values people want to retain in their community is important. Development – whether it is infrastructure, business expansion or environmental improvement - will only be an improvement if it is consistent with the values of the community. A crucial question for citizens is “How do we want our community to be?” Community development is fundamentally about this question. It is a difficult question for communities to answer because values are diverse, and changing and often difficult to articulate.

It is also important to “start small” – to consider what small visible success can be achieved without necessarily at lot of resources or effort. A small success is crucial to developing confidence, enthusiasm and participation. Small successes need to be recognised and celebrated.

Communication is another important “basic”. Simply putting effort into keeping people informed of local activities is crucial. Even in small communities, people are not often fully aware of what different groups are doing and of the opportunities to be involved.

Multi Community Collaboration

Community development has largely focused on individual towns or regions. Yet many individual communities are addressing essentially the same issues and approaching the same funding sources. There is a major opportunity for expanding collaborative community development effort between communities. This might involve a range of opportunities such as simply learning from each other’s experiences through to major multi community projects. For example, several communities on the Darling Downs and Gatton Shire have been involved in the Downs Lockyer Community Network. This is an arrangement for communities to meet every two months in a round robin fashion. It has been an important opportunity for communities to interact and develop greater collaboration.

Collaboration does not mean amalgamation. It is important to maintain the integrity and local ownership of what each community may be doing. The strength of potential collaboration depends on the relationships developed between community members. It does not mean “yet more meetings”, but rather an opportunity to add value to existing community effort and to foster ideas and motivation.

Changes in Government

Changes in rural areas are increasingly challenging government to develop a dual role of not only delivering services but also fostering community capacity. This involves not so much new structures, but a new “governance” - a flexible set of principles, organisation and methods that allows government to live with duality. It provides a way for government to manage representative *and* participative democracy – to not just be an enabler, but *both* a deliverer and enabler.

How government develops a joint service delivery and community role depends, not only on specialist “community developers”, but on how a local police officer, nurse or teacher defines their “work”. Local agency staff are best placed to contribute to community capacity because of their local community relationships and their existing, largely intuitive, contribution to community.

What is policing, educating, nursing, or environmental protection now, and in the future, will continue to be the delivery of services. But a part of an agency’s work will also be conducting delegated work in a way that fosters community relationships, shares power with local people and supports communities becoming more organised and able. The skills of some public servants will not only be technical expertise, but also the ability to facilitate a process that engages a diversity of people, supports community "champions", helps people plan action, networking, conflict resolution, and provides a vehicle for people to act on local concerns.

Developing governance for community engagement involves four key aspects:

Principles, values and assumptions. A set of values across government needs to underpin community engagement and agencies need a consistent set of operating principles.

Structures, services and mechanisms that mediate two way community engagement.

Practice. “Grassroots” attitudes, relationships, and individual behaviour, that form an everyday *modus operandi* for community engagement.

Culture. A culture of engagement needs to go hand in hand with structures and arrangements. Language, practice, relations and behaviour need to culturally demonstrate and sustain good engagement practice (Kenny, 1999).

Developing this new governance involves incremental cultural change. In many ways agencies are communities, with the same diversity, sub-communities and power structures of the communities they serve. Engagement challenges agencies to build their capacity as a “community”, and to apply the principles of community development to their own organisational change.

New forms of accountability are needed to allow agencies to not only account for tangible outcomes and efficient delivery of services, but also for contributing to community organisation, cooperation and attitudinal change. Cavaye (1999) outlined criteria and performance indicators that measure the “quality” of the process with which agencies engage communities, and the resulting impact on community capacity.

New Business Opportunities

The traditional approaches to economic development have centred around recruiting or expanding employers in communities, improving the efficiency of existing firms and providing business infrastructure. It has also often been seen that the difficulty in attracting people to remain in, or move to, rural areas has often been in providing employment. Where will people - and their partner - work? As the economy shifts towards service industries and new occupations, a key question is how can communities, even in isolated areas, develop service oriented jobs.

These remain important approaches. Yet rather than providing employment in regional areas to attract people, it appears that self employment is becoming a greater option for rural and regional people. Rural residents appear to be increasingly establishing their own businesses. Some professional services are being developed with access to major urban markets via information technology. Other retail outlets have been established in rural areas with urban or major regional outlets.

How can self employment be fostered and supported? Some important considerations are:

- **Mentoring:** People interested in establishing a business can be linked with a local business mentor.
- **Networking:** I contend that while venture capital and access to markets are major obstacles, a key barrier is also confidence. Allowing people interested in establishing an enterprise to connect with others is an important step in supporting expertise and confidence.
- **Informal economy:** Many rural people work in the informal “cash in hand” economy. An often overlooked strategy is assisting people to develop a legitimate informal economy business or step from the informal to the formal economy.
- **Community Owned Enterprise:** Many communities have established community owned enterprises such as community banks and hotels. These have been important economic development initiatives. There is a growing opportunity for community ownership to leverage new enterprises for local people to become self employed.

Community Participation

Experience is showing that in organising for community development, people are tiring of committees, public meetings and other “traditional” forms of participation. This raises two issues. First, traditional participation needs to develop as more effective arrangements for deliberation and decision making.

Secondly, people are seeking more informal, temporary and social ways of participating in their community. New forms of community involvement, such as coalitions, temporary commitments and networks of existing community groups are more likely to engage people with very limited volunteer capacity and to encourage broader spectrums of the community. The challenge is to create easier ways for people to act on concerns while at the same time retaining legitimacy, efficiency and articulation with the formal processes of community decision making and democratic representation.

Participation is a question of degree. Figure 1 represents the “layers” of participation in communities. The “core” consists of committed active participants. Participation then becomes less moving from participants who will contribute but not on the committee; observers watching progress to those who are not aware and not interested in the community effort.

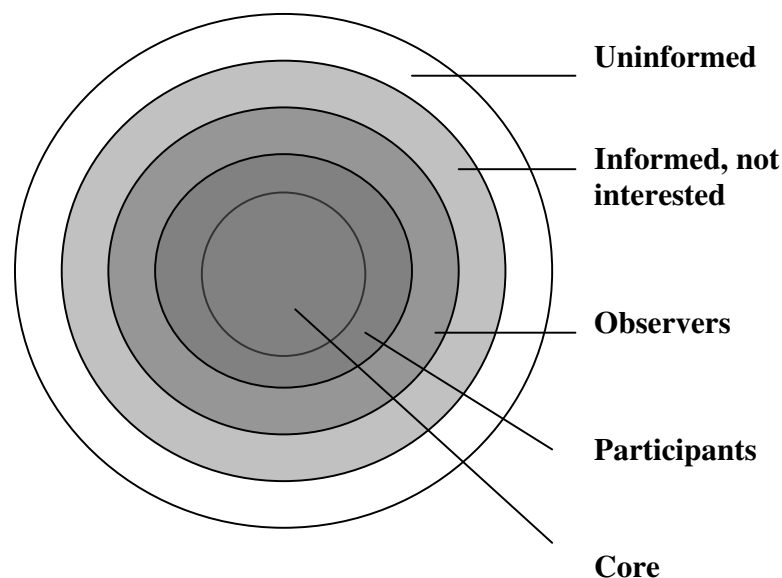


Figure 1. The levels of participation in community

The key issue here is that many communities are working to build the “core” - to encourage more people to be on the committee and be quite active participants. This is clearly important. However, the main opportunity is better mediating the involvement of the other “layers” – to develop more attractive options for people to participate who are not able or willing to be in the core.

Some key questions are:

- What would initiate participation in the community? – What might stimulate someone’s involvement?
- What mediates participation? – What are the avenues or ways in which people could be involved?
- What might inhibit participation? – What are the barriers to people participating?
- How might different sectors of the community want to be involved?

Continuity

A key step in improving the continuity of community development is the development of more sustainable ways of resourcing community development. My view is that public funding will remain a key part of stimulating and initiating community development. However, it is unrealistic for community development efforts to be almost entirely sustained by ongoing public funding. Options for continuity of resourcing of community development effort involve:

- The expansion of community foundations, particularly in relation to multi-community collaboration,
- Greater use of community owned enterprise in stimulating local economic development,
- Linkage with the private sector. I contend that corporate support for community development is limited not so much by lack of funds but by traditional “sponsorship” thinking. This means providing money for community development as a “good deed” rather than as part of a partnership between business and communities. The corporate sector has a business interest in strong stable communities. An investment in community development is part of broader modern corporate governance. The relationship between Toyota Corporation and the residents of Altona in Victoria is a clear example of what is possible. It is important to develop relationships that are true partnerships and reduce the risk of co-option.

Schools and Communities

The role of schools and learning as the centre of vibrant communities and sustained community development is becoming increasingly important. In turn, functioning communities can enhance teaching and learning outcomes. Some very innovative and successful work is continuing on this topic and the role of “learning communities” is building momentum. Yet major opportunities remain to strengthen schools as communities of students, teachers and parents, and to build stronger links between schools and communities. School/community linkages would include issues such as orientation for new teachers, community mentors and champions, and incorporating community activities and issues into the curriculum.

Conclusion

Community development faces many issues and opportunities. Many issues are compromises between enthusiasm and fatigue, focus and continuity, service delivery and partnership. Many opportunities involve innovation and experimentation rather than radical change. Taking advantage of these opportunities will depend on the extent to which communities, government and business can implement key principles of community development – networking, leadership confidence and cultural change.