



Institute for  
Resilient Regions

# **Pathways to the future: building local strategies for regional resilience and sustainable development in central western Queensland**

**Boulia Regional Council Workshop  
20 February 2016  
Report**



## **1.1 Workshop Context**

In Central Western Queensland, the current drought emergency has stimulated a range of responses including the Community Drought Leadership Groups with their toolkits enabling communities to develop drought response plans and make the most of existing resources.

Building on these initiatives and recognising the importance of assisting regional communities focus on longer term thinking and planning, the Remote Area Planning and Development Board has invited USQ's Institute for Resilient Regions to conduct a series of workshops to engage community participation in a creative process structured around the following questions:

- What is the longer-term future for central western Queensland?
- What are the options for sustainable development in our region?
- How do we make our communities as resilient as possible?

## **1.2 Background**

By working cooperatively across the region with key stakeholders in each local authority district the aim of the workshop series is to assist in strengthening community resilience by elevating leadership focus beyond the current drought emergency to the opportunities that might be developed sustainably and which inevitably would involve innovation of some form or another.

There are many possible or plausible futures for the region. Regional development is the outcome of a complex interplay of a myriad of factors, reflecting in part the capacities of local leadership and decision-making as well as community understanding and involvement in developing the narrative and exploring the possibilities. Compounding these considerations is the magnitude of innovation happening more generally in the world which bears directly on the future for regional communities.

Sustainable development means development that takes account of the needs of future generations as well as today's. Sustainable means to continue indefinitely. So by definition, sustainable development for central western Queensland will be long term in its ambition and capacity, resilient, and possible for today's communities. The human capital factor is crucial to building sustainable development, making regions resilient

and achieving a preferred future for the people. In itself resilience is not an end, but is actually a function of a thriving regional system. To build resilience, crucial enabling factors in a region or community have to be assured and developed. These include<sup>i</sup>:

- Awareness – *people understand what's going on*
- Diversity – *has more than one talent, asset or strength*
- Integration – *connectivity is strong to ensure the community draws on all the resources available including all its people*
- Self-regulation – *the region/community can make decisions for itself, take the initiative and partner with others*
- Adaptive – *region/community/individuals can learn, develop alternatives, change and innovate.*

### **1.3 Workshop format**

A day long workshop involving 24 community participants from across the Boulia region was convened in the Shire Hall, Boulia on Saturday 20 February 2016. After a short welcome by Boulia Mayor, Cr Rick Britton, the facilitator John Cole outlined the workshop aims, key assumptions, the principles and protocols used when working together using the Appreciative Inquiry Framework. Key themes likely to shape the future over the coming decades at the global, national, and regional levels were canvassed and the function and character of resilience in regional development was also explained.

Participants were advised that the day would be framed around a recognition that human systems “grow and construct their future realities in the direction of what they most persistently, actively, and collectively ask questions about”<sup>ii</sup> and that “...people [communities] and organisations are full of assets, capabilities, resources and strengths that can be located, affirmed, leveraged and encouraged.”<sup>iii</sup> In that context the workshop would focus on three strategic questions:

1. Where/what/who are we now?
2. What do we want to go for?
3. What and how will be the best way to get there?

Participants were advised that positive or appreciative inquiry worked in community planning and development by:

- Choosing the positive as the focus of inquiry.
- Inquiring into stories that give life to the region.

- Locating themes and drilling deeper into causality and linkage creating shared images of a preferred future.
- Applying knowledge of what works and what's possible.
- Imagining boldly and finding innovative ways to create that future.
- Collaborating and building collective capacity by sharing insights, information and resources.

#### **1.4 Individual expectations from the workshop**

After the introduction, participants were canvassed about what they wanted to get out of the day. Better community integration, more efficient use of resources and diversification came through as themes of interest. Responses included:

- *See more community integration – stronger, more connected.*
- *Get everyone back together again.*
- *Jobs outside of landowners and the council.*
- *Ideas to get diversity.*
- *Make the most of what we have here and what we do – capitalise on our own resources – make better use of the resources we have here.*
- *Find out ideas from other people.*
- *See what everyone else wants.*

# Workshop Outputs

## 2.1 Valuing the best of the Boulia region

In this session, participants were encouraged to consider a range of questions aimed at building a positive narrative while attuning the thinking in the group to positive appreciation. The aim was to tell stories that appreciated the best about life in the Boulia region while creating group awareness of “*our region, our community – its strengths, values and enablers*”.

Participants were asked to “Tell us a story about....

1. What’s great about the region?
2. What’s unique about our part of the world?
3. Why do we like living where we do?

In response to these questions, there was a range of observations, but a focus on “community” was strongest:

- *The people – resilient, committed, busy, energetic, self-reliant.*
- *Great history, the story of Boulia – the hardship of the historical times – the resilient and stoic people who made a go of it.*
- *Relaxed, safe place to live.*
- *Great sense of community and pride.*
- *Community groups – everyone can be a part of something.*
- *People are interested in the future and get involved and support each other – there is connection, we feel alive in our connection, we care about each other.*
- *People can achieve and are encouraged more in a smaller community where everyone knows each other.*
- *Great life experiences – our children are exposed to life skills that other kids are not – exposure to the natural world, they know where our food comes from, they are independent - they can fix their own bikes.*
- *Strong Indigenous population and culture – Boulia is a significant Aboriginal trade centre.*
- *We’re all in it together – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal.*
- *Unique wildlife species and natural resources.*

## 2.2 Positive examples of regional strength, capacity and success - past and present in the Boulia region

Turning to stories of success and achievement the following questions were used as prompts:

- What are the successes of our region?
- What are we really good at? Why?
- Why was something particularly a regional highpoint?
- Where and when has innovation worked locally?
- What has been an exciting community achievement?

In response participants offered specific examples:

### Economic

- *A very tidy, fresh-looking, smart town; great shire hall.*
- *Good connections to a larger regional centre in Mount Isa.*
- *The 'Min Min Centre' – big attraction – another industry for the area.*
- *The Marine Fossil Museum.*
- *14,000 tourists visit the town each year.*
- *Historical stories – there's a romance about the place.*
- *Adapting our primary industries from sheep to cattle by adapting to change and opportunity.*

### Social

- *Great amenities and services (pool and gym, main street, access to medical services).*
- *We punch above our weight for a small community, we seem to have good access to the political ear.*
- *Tennis, beach parties, barn dances, trivia nights, bingo.*
- *We tend to be strongest when we're doing things that everyone can be part of.*
- *Kids get great life experience, self-reliance, and knowledge of their world.*
- *Community spirit, everyone gets together when it floods.*
- *"The time we distributed all the ice-creams in the flood".*
- *The whole town gets together in times of emergency – e.g. when somebody goes missing.*

- *We have indigenous culture and community.*
- *People make bush medicine and have local knowledge.*
- *Our history shows a track record of local self-sufficiency from using indigenous bush medicine to earlier generations growing market gardens on the river to milking goats.*
- *We're all in it together – Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people/kids lived together in the past – black and white weren't segregated – we don't have deep racial divides.*

### Environmental

- *Best marine fossils in Queensland.*
- *Good water.*
- *Wildlife in our backyards that most Australians never see – Brolgas in the main street.*
- *Amazing bird life in wet times – big attraction to visitors.*
- *Night parrot.*
- *Wildlife – fishing in the river.*
- *Indigenous bush knowledge.*

## **2.3 Core themes emergent**

When asked what had been the key themes and/or learning experiences in the stories that had been told during the discovery session the group concluded that:

- *There isn't one snap-shot that is Boulia – the town has changed over years, we have adapted to change and opportunity.*
- *Boulia people are resilient, committed, busy, energetic, self-reliant.*
- *Great sense of community, pride and spirit.*
- *Relaxed, safe place to live.*
- *Wonderful history, the story of Boulia.*
- *Good amenities and services.*
- *Kids get great life experience, self-reliance, and knowledge of their world.*
- *Strong Indigenous population and culture – Boulia is a significant Aboriginal trade centre.*
- *Unique wildlife species and natural resources.*

### **3. Imagining the Boulia region making the most of its strengths**

The objective of this second session was to assist the group image what might be possible in the Boulia region by building on the best of the successes and strengths outlined earlier. The group was encouraged to boldly dream the possibilities by extending its thinking and harnessing the aspirations of each of the individual participants.

The group was presented with the following questions:

Taking account of what already is happening but imagining a stronger resilient more sustainable future for the Boulia region...

- What would it be like?
- How would it be different?
- What would be the positive changes you would like to see happen?
- What if our region was to really excel at something in future, what could it be, what would it look like?
- If we really all worked together what would our community look like in 10 years?
- What external parties/factors outside the region are important to this proposition/vision?
- How would we be different?
- What would you be most proud of about your role in making this happen?

#### **3.1 Key elements of a vision for the region's future**

In response to these prompts, the group volunteered a range of observations starting with:

- Boulia region would be attracting more people and a place where our kids can come home to because it would have more industry (jobs) and housing infrastructure and more accessible land for development.
- Boulia's town infrastructure would be more 'family friendly' in amenity with parks, playgrounds, Skate Park, Water Park, and shade for the pool.



- State Government would be more supportive of private sector development by making it easier and cheaper to convert land from leasehold to freehold.
- Boulia would rely less on its local government (council) and draw more from community members organising to do things for ourselves involving more people along the way.
- Families would be able to live in Boulia and educate their children up to Grade 12 at the local school which would also have great tele-education facilities.
- Boulia's connectivity to the outside world would be enhanced by a double-lane highway to Mount Isa and a daily passenger bus service to there.
- We would care for ourselves in our own community or on-country through community programs like Meals on Wheels, Blue-Care, Home and Community Care using our qualified local health care workers and technology that meant people did not have to go away for treatment.
- Community services would be provided and managed in a common sense way from Boulia rather than from Mount Isa (e.g. mental health, ATODS, HACC, and Family Services) and there would be shared services for all with no black/white differences – services that we can all receive equally (e.g. school transport, vaccinations).
- We would make greater use of affordable renewable energy because the State regulatory requirements for a closed, off-grid system would encourage growth in renewable energy generation and storage.
- Government and public servants would have a better understanding of the needs and unique circumstances of remote communities like Boulia.
- The rest of the world would know a lot more about what we have and indigenous history and heritage would be well presented and understood by younger generations.
- Urandandji would have water, sewerage and housing services.

These points coalesced into a consensus about a vision for Boulia which could be summarised as:

- ***A place where people can raise and sustain families, seek employment opportunities, and care for each other 'on-country' and as part of the community.***

## **4. Designing how the vision for the future will be realised**

We create pathways to the future and new capacity by building on what we have discovered and imagined for our region. The focus of this post-lunch session was on the changes needed to make a reality of each element of the group's vision for the future of the Boulia region.

### **4.1 Priority goals for the future**

At the start of the session there was a general discussion about priority goals essential in achieving the vision, which were essentially distilled to the following four points:

1. **Distance barriers and costs could be lessened** by extending existing fibre optic digital infrastructure in Boulia town with concurrent development of a digital strategy for the community.
2. **Existing resources could be made more productive** through multi-functional use of schools, libraries and services facilities.
3. **Economic diversification** is possible through tourism, value adding in food production including kangaroos, and increased use of renewable energy.
4. **Community resilience will be strengthened** if we seek to do more ourselves and work as 'one community'.

#### **4.2 Distance barriers and costs could be lessened by extending existing fibre optic digital infrastructure in Boulia town with concurrent development of a digital strategy for the community**

- Improved bandwidth and connectivity will create new options for the school and for town including stronger engagement with the outside world.
- Existing installed fibre optic should be connected to the health centre and the school, then these facilities used to boost connectivity to the rest of the community.
- A community-based digital strategy would facilitate local discussion and knowledge about how to better engage with the outside world and how to better utilise the communications facilities that we have
- Digital skills in young people will develop through improved connectivity by enabling mobile devices in education
- State Government should be engaged to link the school to fibre optic upgrade and then provision made for public access out of hours to the connection
- Better telehealth services would be delivered by upgraded digital communications to the health centre.

#### **4.3 Existing resources could be made more productive through multi-functional use of schools, libraries and services facilities**

- Investment and extension of parks and public playground amenities would be useful in facilitating community integration and harmony especially among children through play and proximity.
- Free access to the internet at the library would draw young people into the facility for learning and social interaction as well as play.
- Local conversations about ways to better use existing infrastructure can be a catalyst to helping us change the way we do things.

- Building digital capacity (see above 4.2) can be facilitated by optimising existing infrastructure.

#### **4.4 Economic diversification is possible through tourism, value adding in food production including kangaroos, and increased use of renewable energy.**

The group explored opportunities to expand and diversify the economy in the Boulia Regional Council area. Suggestions included:

- More constructive use of indigenous people particularly in addressing development processes, stakeholder engagement and communication with Traditional Owners and historical peoples.
- Undertaking a skills audit of the community to identify local technical skills available in the community not currently deployed.
- Government could develop traineeships for property work providing opportunities for local youth especially.
- Development of options for the cattle industry to minimise dependence on any one option either live export or meat processing.
- Economic development discussions should be held with Mount Isa and other regional stakeholders through the Federal Government's Northern Australia Strategy.
- A higher profile for indigenous art and culture strengthens case for additional facilities attracting visitors and longer stays.
- New impetus should be given to collaboration between Boulia, Barcoo and Diamantina councils on infrastructure strategies.
- Council should lead active discussion with State Government about introducing a regulatory framework for regional renewable energy that encourages local self-sufficiency and involvement by private enterprise.

#### **4.5 Community resilience will be strengthened if we seek to do more ourselves and work as one community**

- We need to talk to each other in Boulia and get an agreed agenda.
- Boulia will be more successful and stronger if we focus on working together inclusively as 'one community' free of racial and cultural divisions.
- For a community to function as one, we need to talk more inclusively.
- Sharing knowledge and information around the community is important so people know the full story about things like housing and other projects and needs around the town.
- Think about an organisation of people like us at this table, who can organise a conversation in the community, to work with council on some of these issues – to generate informed community discussion.

### **5.0 Close and Next Steps**

In closing, the group discussed a number of strategic questions to contextualise their strategies. The first of these questions was:

**What do we REALLY need to change to make these things happen?**

- 1.** *We need to be committed to working together and uniting as a community.*
- 2.** *Council is vitally important but we can also do or at least start a lot more things ourselves.*
- 3.** *Community process will work much better if information is shared more widely in meetings like this to discuss local priorities.*

The second bracket of questions considered in closing was:

**What did we do today and why was it important?**

- *There was a lot more people here with positive things to bring to the table than I expected, and I'm really feeling a sense of community again because we've all been able to sit together.*
- *We have a very diverse range of people in the group, however we've come together and raised complex challenges – coming together.*
- *Today will not be purposeful if we don't have a where to and what to do next. It's about commitment*
- *Once we walk out of this door, we need to unite. This is safe place to have the conflict and discussions, but we need to unite.*
- *Everybody is interested in coming together again.*
- *More people will turn up if there is a positive message about this forum: 'My concern was listened to respectfully'*
- *Heard the voices of people concerned who want to make this their community a better place*
- *I heard a lot of good ideas, I'd like to see something done.*
- *Heard some conflict about what this mob or that mob did or didn't get, but we've got to come together as a community, we need to work together.*
- *Community involvement is here today, it needs to keep going.*
- *Meetings like this could be held before council meetings to discuss things (include the people from Urandandji and Lake Nash) and provide clear community feedback to the council.*

The final question considered by the group was:

What do we as a group and as individuals say when we communicate about what we've done today?

- What did we do today?
  - *We've discussed and shared information and learned from each other.*
  - *We've listened to each other respectfully and heard a lot of good ideas.*
  - *We've identified some priority goals.*
  - *We've talked honestly about our community and about making it a better place.*
  - *We have asked for follow-up on our discussions in the community and in Council.*

Mayor Rick Britton joined the final session and in his closing remarks he stated:

The community needs to do this themselves, regardless of having people on the council

- *You have a voice, you need to get together in groups like this to discuss things*
- *The community needs to come together to drive the agenda for council*
- *Boulia, Urandandji, all communities, need to be involved in a strong community voice.*

---

<sup>i</sup> Rodin, J (2014) *The Resilience Dividend: Managing disruption, avoiding disaster, and growing stronger in an unpredictable world*, Perseus Books, New York,

<sup>ii</sup> Ludema, JD, Cooperrider DL, and Barrett, FJ *Appreciative Inquiry: The Power of the Unconditional Positive Question*. <http://www.2012waic.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/Ludema-Cooperrider-Barrett-goed.pdf>

<sup>iii</sup> Bliss Brown, *Imagine Chicago*.