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

Longreach Regional Council Workshop
28 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 more than one 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[i]:

- 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 XX community participants from across the Blackall-Tambo region was convened in the Cultural Centre, Blackall on Saturday 27 February 2016. After a short welcome by Mayor Cr Barry Muir, 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"[ii] and that "…people [communities] and organisations are full of assets, capabilities, resources and strengths that can be located, affirmed, leveraged and encouraged."[iii] In that context the workshop focused on <u>three strategic questions</u>:

> **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. Most participants indicated an interest in sharing and learning. Responses included:

- *Collaboration within and across the community, focussing on the core skills and strengths we have, collectively making better use of ourselves*

- *Starting the conversation around the community about where we're going to go*

- *Skills identification*

- *See where the conversation leads, health focus*

- *What's the way forward, collaboration*

- *Community engagement*

- *Yearning for some action*

Workshop Outputs

2.1 Valuing the best of the Longreach region

In this session participants were encouraged to consider a couple 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 Longreach region while and creating group awareness of "our region, our community – its strengths, values and enablers".

 Participants were asked to make observations on the following:

- What's great about the region?

- What's unique about our communities?

- Why do we like living where we do?

In response to these questions, there was a range of observations:

- *Welcoming, warm, inclusiveness, making comfortable, people stop and talk, very accepting.*

- *Birth of our first child in Longreach hospital - the community support, flowers, and welcome from the community was very special.*

- *Laid back, no 'hustle and bustle', friendliness, accepting of everyone provided they're not trying to throw their weight around.*

- *We have great opportunities.*

- *We love to celebrate stuff, we like to be positive, have fun, show our passion.*

- *We have the people, the stories, the product, and the youth.*

- *We have a great untapped source of energy and action, in our people and our place.*

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

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

- What are the successes of our region?
- What has been an exciting community achievement?
- Why was something particularly a highpoint?

In response participants offered specific examples:

Economic

- *Pastoral and grazing: we are a rural-based town.*

- *The tourism industry.*

- *Amenities and services.*

- *Establishment of the Longreach Pastoral College.*

- *Opening of the Stockmen's Hall of Fame 1988 – beginning of a period of tremendous growth for town and region and it happened because a person championed/led, there was real collaboration between councils in the region, and there was focus on the broader region in the project.*

Social

- *Community response in times of need, when something goes wrong – because there is a desire from all to help – a proactive interest and willingness to be involved.*

- *Dinner under the stars" - Olympic fundraising 1995, 1200 people on the tarmac showed what we can do, people elsewhere are highly impressed with our ability to pull these things off.*

- *It's a very safe community – a training ground for police officers, people like this and are proud of it.*

- *Annual show, promoting the region - It celebrates us, recognises everyone's contribution and is socially affirming - bringing families and individuals together, celebrating skills (e.g. art work), finding new things, fun, exploring.*

- *The annual Street Party evokes a big sense of community and place, relaxed atmosphere, community group organised, and other groups get involved. It brings everyone into one place.*

- *The local horse races are good examples of social events supported by voluntary community participation in organising and staging the event.*

Environmental

- *We have a strong sense of place.*

- *The night sky in winter, or being able to go out to the open downs, amazing landscape, wonderful river, the mighty Thomson – life-blood of local recreation, relaxation.*
- *We are in the Lake Eyre Basin, all our towns and communities except Alpha are all connected by the same, unique, inland river system.*

2.3 Core themes emergent

Discussing the key themes in the stories that had been told during the discovery session the group concluded that:

- *There is a strong sense of connected local community and belonging.*
- *When we get ourselves organised we can do big things.*
- *Longreach is relatively well-served with services, facilities and amenities.*
- *The climatic and seasonal cycles have a major impact on our economy.*
- *There are local resources – human and natural - as yet untapped.*

3. Imagining the 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 Longreach region by building on the best of the successes and strengths outlined earlier.

<mark>Drawing on a 'futuring' methodology called 'back-casting', the group was presented with the following scenario</mark>:

"It is fifteen years into the future in 2031 and you are walking down the street in Brisbane when you bump into an old friend, Charlie, from Longreach who has not been here for many years. Charlie has heard that good things have been happening in Longreach and asks you for the details of the main achievements and changes that have drawn on the regions's core character and capacities.

"Taking account of what already has happened but imagining a stronger resilient more sustainable future for the Longreach region what do you tell Charlie?"

- What would Longreach be like?
- How would it be different to what is now?
- What have been some of the major achievements that have shaped the Longreach of 2031?
- How was the community involved?
- What did we do by ourselves?

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

In response to these prompts, the group worked at tables and volunteered a range of suggestions each one of which was written on a yellow slip and attached to a board with ideas being clustered into specific topics:

Cluster 1: Business and Technological Innovation –

- *Longreach has a Business Innovation Centre.*
- *Funding existed for local businesses to develop new opportunities.*
- *A local community forum considers, vets and promotes innovative projects to funding sources.*

- *Longreach boasts a design innovation hub for high tech industries.*
- *Longreach Data Centre has expanded and now employs 150 people.*
- *Longreach supports a High Technology Hub providing economic and social benefits.*
- *Slow internet speeds and communications blackspots are a distant memory.*
- *Longreach is connected to the world physically and digitally.*
- *Longreach is the "customer service capital" of Australia;*
- *Employment in Longreach is highly sought after.*

Cluster 2: Primary Industries and natural resources

- *Farming production is diversified delivering new economic opportunity.*
- *Diversified farming production delivers local food security.*
- *Innovation in farming production has made it sustainable;*
- *The region has a rangeland agricultural brand.*
- *Local agriculture is a world leader in sustainable use and re-use of water.*
- *Primary producers and their supply chain have developed redundancy strategies for resilience in dealing with climatic cycles.*
- *Longreach has the infrastructure to secure sustainable water resources.*
- *Water resourcing constraints of the past have been overcome and Longreach is "drought proofed".*

Cluster 3: Energy self-sufficiency

- *Central western communities own, produce, and store their own energy.*
- *Longreach has reduced its carbon footprint substantially using sustainable renewable energy.*
- *Geothermal and solar energy are the main sources of reliable renewable energy.*

Cluster 4: Tourism

- *Tourism numbers have increased by 50%.*
- *International direct flights connect Longreach to overseas.*
- *Longreach is a top 20 tourism destination in Australia for domestic and international tourists.*

Cluster 5: Cultural, community and education -

- *Longreach boasts a rich and thriving cultural scene;*
- *Longreach regularly hosts "big events."*
- *Longreach has a thriving network of community groups providing facilities and mutual support.*
- *The agricultural college has broadened its role and is offering a wider range of courses.*
- *The Longreach Trades Training Centre is offering a diversity of courses.*
- *A University campus has been established at Longreach offering courses in rural industries, science and tourism;*
- *Longreach is a cultural brand.*
- *Longreach still has the same "look and feel."*

Cluster 6: Health and Well-Being –

- *Collaborative health model of Longreach is a role model for rural/remote communities across the world;*
- *We treat our people locally.*
- *We've closed the gap on indigenous health.*
- *We are sharing and selling the intellectual property we've developed in modern health care management.*
- *We care for our elderly in local aged care facilities.*
- *30 locally trained doctors are now living in Longreach.*

These points coalesced into a **shared vision** epitomised in the image of the **vision tree** promoted by the group which the facilitator has summarised as:

Longreach is a place and community

- **grounded in its values, history and heritage;**

- **inclusive, creative, connected, and open;**

- **confident and self-organising;**

- **looking to make the most of its resources and opportunities;**

- **economically diversified and innovative across agriculture, tourism and human services;**

- **self-sufficient in key natural resources like water and energy which are managed sustainably;**

- **effectively engaged with partners (public and private) to collaborate in making the future.**

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 for the main elements of the group's vision for the future of the Longreach region.

4.1 Priority goals for the future

At the start of the session the group prioritised the core themes and requisites of the vision for further development.

The core vision elements/requisites prioritised by the group included:

1. **Longreach is able to exploit the opportunities of the future because it has achieved water security sufficient for further development**.

2. **Longreach's economic diversification is boosted by the major development of the tourism sector as a pillar of the regional economy.**

3. **Longreach's agricultural sector is productive, profitable and contributing substantially to a robust diversified local economy.**

4. **Longreach is self-sufficient in energy which is sourced from clean renewable resources.**

5. **The health and well-being of Longreach people is improved and people are cared for locally with the further development of a world class regional and rural health system.**

6. **Longreach's community groups are well-organised, inclusive, creative, connected, and open.**

Working sub-groups were established to address each theme sequentially, each core theme being seen through the prism of different responses to two questions:

- How did this theme happen?

- What was done differently to achieve the particular vision?

4.2 Longreach is able to exploit the opportunities of the future because it has achieved water security sufficient for further development.

Addressing the "what" and "how," the ideas promoted by the three groups included strategies:

1. Detailed feasibility analysis and preparations resulted in persuasive and strongly validated proposals informing the creation of public-private partnerships (PPPs).
2. Strongly led local campaigns engendered broad community awareness and support for the proposal.
3. The proposed program was systemic in format involving a range of sources and technologies – bores, weirs, pipes, and ultra-efficiency in water use.
4. Innovation featured strongly in the program including the use of solar and geo-thermal energy to filter bore water, secure town supply, and underwrite new industries in hydroponic foods and algal biofuels.

In explaining what was different about this approach that led to its success, the key points were:

1. The political pitch of the proposal was carefully argued and comprehensively explained in the broader proposition of the future of regional communities and their significance to the nation.

2. *Strong community agreement and support for the proposal made it more compelling when seeking State and Federal Government support.*
3. *The case for the infrastructure and funding demonstrated the business case in such a way as to make it a public-private partnership opportunity for investment.*

4.3 Longreach's economic diversification is boosted by the major development of the tourism sector as a pillar of the regional economy.

Addressing the "what" and "how," the ideas included strategies:

1. *Developed a range of tourism experiences providing immersive contact with the landscape.*
2. *Longreach tourism developed a reputation for high quality service based on our values – in both the natural resource management sense and in the community cultural sense.*
3. *A cohesive regional marketing campaign was conducted focussed on both domestic and international markets and emphasising digital and social media connectivity.*
4. *The regional local governments were involved and actively supported tourism promotion.*
5. *A tourism education college was established in Longreach;*
6. *Community Tourism Ambassadors were appointed.*
7. *Indigenous culture was promoted in tourism profiles.*
8. *Niche marketing opportunities were developed around corporate retreats, youth groups, international groups.*
9. *Large scale cultural events were integral to the regional tourism strategy.*
10. *Accommodation options have developed across a spectrum from home-stays to 5 star.*
11. *A strong community based advisory committee actively enriched and promoted tourism development.*

Focussing on what had changed for this to happen and what had been done differently, (remembering that the Longreach workshop used back-casting methodology to design and build its vision (dream) the group suggested that:

1. *Development of a "Longreach Enterprise" collaborative platform hosted a "sinking fund" for the rejuvenation and development of regional tourism.*
2. *Creation of a Longreach tourism collective facilitating group visitation lowered flight costs.*
3. *Local tourism industry was much more strongly partnering with itself and other groups including Tourism Australia;*
4. *Direct partnerships with international tourism providers attracted higher numbers of overseas visitors.*
5. *Direct connections and partnerships with international investors focussed funding on tourism infrastructure in the region.*
6. *Creation of event specific tourism strategies staged in the shoulder seasons – river festival, concerts and corporate sponsored events.*
7. *Longreach stayed true to its values and heritage and built a strong tourism industry and infrastructure without becoming Disneyland.*

4.4 Longreach's agricultural sector is productive, profitable and contributing substantially to a robust diversified local economy

Addressing the "what" and "how," the ideas included:

1. *New flexible models of land ownership released financial capital and empowered the next generation of primary producers.*
2. *A strong regional brand was developed for primary produce based on regional industry standards that encouraged differentiation and premium grading of produce.*

Focussing on what had changed for this to happen and what had been done differently, the group suggested that:

1. *Local agriculture had been re-capitalised by producers accessing foreign investment and funding from international superannuation funds.*
2. *Local producers had used existing supply chains in new ways to directly engage markets and offer niche and diverse products and services eg "contract kills".*

3. *Longreach producers collaborated to develop intellectual property in farm production and marketing that was commercialised and diffused.*

4.5 Longreach is self-sufficient in energy which is sourced from clean renewable resources.

Addressing the "what" and "how," the ideas included:

   1. *Longreach developed community-owned distributed renewable energy and storage systems.*
   2. *Renewable sources included wind, solar, and geothermal (used for base load security).*

What had changed for this to happen and what had been done differently, the group suggested that:

   1. *The goal had been achieved progressively starting with investing savings from energy efficiency initiatives.*
   2. *private sector partners had been engaged to develop and advance project proposals.*
   3. *the community had collaborated with project proponents to convince the State Government to change its regulatory and energy ownership frameworks constraining regional development of renewable energy.*

4.6 The health and well-being of Longreach people is improved and people are cared for locally with the further development of a world class regional and rural health system.

Addressing the "what" and "how," the ideas included:

   1. *Development of a world class rural and regional primary health care system focussed on achieving resilience through efficiencies and doing more with less.*
   2. *Local medical capacity was increased by awarding sponsorships to locally born students to study medicine/health disciplines and return to Longreach to practice.*
   3. *Improved local health services resulted in fewer transfers out leaving people to be cared for locally.*

4. *Softer entry to the health system through expansion of allied health facilities creates savings in the primary health care area;*
5. *Efficiencies and technological innovation also drive plans for a new regional hospital based in Longreach.*
6. *Health care is delivered through a range of media including telehealth, FIFO specialists, and an expanded regional profession.*
7. *Increased emphasis on health education and awareness is resulting in slower growth in demand for primary health care and increased local health and well-being.*

Focussing on what had changed for this to happen and what had been done differently, the group suggested that:

1. *A regional team approach saw the establishment of just one practice and administrative model in the central west and a raft of partnerships that generated impact, better use of facilities and increased capacity.*
2. *Digital innovation in health services practice generated efficiencies and new capacities.*
3. *The community actively sponsored a range of public/private partnerships aimed at reducing chronic disease through healthier lifestyles and much better health awareness and literacy.*
4. *Health services were better engaged with the community and evidenced a welcoming customer focus in their culture and practice.*
5. *All the above made CWQ medical employment more attractive to young Australian doctors.*

4.7 Longreach's community groups are well-organised, inclusive, creative, connected, and open.

Addressing the "what" and "how," the ideas included:

1. *Much greater recognition in the community was given to volunteering through thank you events and awards.*
2. *Community groups were nurtured by active mentoring and education programs.*
3. *Community groups emphasised partnerships between themselves and sharing resources and capacities.*

4. *Skills audits were done to collect and harness the capabilities of community members.*
5. *Community succession planning was actively considered and address with initiatives to encourage participation.*

Focussing on what had changed for this to happen and what had been done differently, the group suggested that:

1. *Community groups actively sought to address the reasons for community organisations in the first place through education and sharper strategy for growth and renewal.*
2. *Longreach groups drew insight, ideas and strength by partnering more actively with other groups beyond the region.*
3. *Community groups focussed more on the idea of self-organisation, local initiation and building community self-reliance through their activities.*

5.0 Close and Next Steps

In closing the group re-formed into the whole and discussed two questions:

1. **How can we best work collectively to achieve the collective vision?**

2. **What are the new relationships we need to make our future happen?**

When discussing how best to work collectively to achieve the shared vision, the following observations were made:

• *When we strip away our formal, usual roles, we function better as a community.*

• *Forget who we are, and come together as a group of individuals, as community members.*

• *Every community needs ownership of their vision.*

• *Be aware of, and build links with, the range of socio-economic groups in our community and bring people on the journey.*

- *To get community buy-in – let people with passion and strengths do their stuff – help them to run with it, we all have a civic responsibility to chip in and help those having a go.*

- *To overcome the perception from state and federal governments that there are no votes here or nothing that matters here, we need first to come up with our own solutions.*

- *Going forwards we should be juggling between bringing enough people on board, and getting ACTION – sometimes we will make mistakes, the point will be to learn from them.*

When discussing the new relationships we need to make our future happen, the group made the following key observations?

- *Make sure our key relationships with the state and federal governments are well informed and that they know what we're doing and plan to do.*

- *Work proactively with government partners, and other business and community partners to develop our vision.*

- *There are a number of communities within Longreach that we need to reach.*

- *It's not just a Longreach thing – we should think regionally, and think outside our own region.*

- *Given there is some scepticism about councils –we need some kind of regional-based group drawn from across the community to provide guidance or discussion – not just councils.*

- *The role of businesses is important; they take risks, invest above and beyond –collaboration with and between businesses is essential to help momentum in starting projects.*

- *Look outside our community too, once we have road-tested the ideas and directions – look at what is going on in other regions of Australia and the world.*

When asked about what type of follow-up they would like to see arising from the workshop, the group said that:

1.   *This report from today should be provided to the participants.*

2.   *The report of this workshop must be taken back out to the community.*

3.   *Our work today should be reported back to council and used for regional plans and steps taken to promote community ownership of the future pathways conversation.*

4.   *The process should be extended also to include high school students.*

Finally, at the closing of the workshop remaining members of the group were asked what the group and its participants should say when communicating about what we've done today?

<mark>What did we do today?</mark>

- *We developed a vision for the future of Longreach region, looked 15 years ahead, and established what we want to see, and we came up with some really good ideas.*

- *We have furthered the vision, we have all come from different perspectives and combined our views.*

- *We have clearly laid out where we think our PRIORITIES are for the future*

- *Identified a goal to head to, and identified the tools that we will need to get there.*

- *We have used the collective wisdom of this group to flesh out the priorities and share how we can achieve this together.*

- *We have identified strong commonalities of issues and pathways.*

- *We have heard other people's knowledge and expertise, and transferred that across a range of issues – delving into each other's minds. Seeing our problems through somebody else's eyes.*

- *We have confirmed other discussions that we have been having for some time.*

- *We have achieved a blue-print and we have prioritised the most immediate needs – other ideas and initiatives will follow from the immediate, foundational goals and needs.*

At the very end of the workshop, to the question <mark>"Why is all this we have done today important</mark>?" the following observations were captured:

- *My life, and my wanting to live in this community with my kids, means that I want to plot a pathway to a better future for my kids; I choose to belong here and want a future for my kids here.*

- *We are choosing to transition from operating under local government [ie looking to government to do it for us] to taking responsibility for our own future.*

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[i] Rodin, J (2014) The Resilience Dividend: Managing disruption, avoiding disaster, and growing stronger in an unpredictable world, Perseus Books, New York.

[ii] 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

[iii] Bliss Brown, Imagine Chicago.