



Institute for
Resilient Regions

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

**Barcaldine Regional Council Workshop
24 October 2015
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:

1. What is the longer-term future for central western Queensland?
2. What are the options for sustainable development in our region?
3. 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 able 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 includeⁱ:

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

1.3 Workshop format

A day long workshop involving 26 community participants from across the Barcaldine region (all under the age of 30) was convened in the Shire Hall, Barcaldine on Saturday 24 October. After a short welcome by Barcaldine Mayor Cr Rob Chandler, 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 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:

- a) Choosing the positive as the focus of inquiry
- b) Inquiring into stories that give life to the region
- c) Locating themes and drilling deeper into causality and linkage creating shared images of a preferred future
- d) Applying knowledge of what works and what's possible
- e) Imagining boldly and finding innovative ways to create that future
- f) 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 learning. Responses included:

- *Find out ideas from other people.*
- *See what everyone else wants.*
- *Learning from others.*
- *Look at ways to build capacity for health and well-being – especially mental health.*
- *Better understand the community and the area.*
- *How to stimulate the economy, get better infrastructure, and new business.*
- *How to build better connections/cohesion within communities.*
- *How to work together more effectively – how to build better networks.*

Workshop Outputs

2.1 Valuing the best of the Barcaldine 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 Barcaldine region while creating group awareness of “our region, our community – its strengths, values and enablers”.

Participants were asked to make observations on the following:

1. What really defines us as a region and a community?
2. How did we get this far?
3. What’s great about the region?
4. What’s unique about our communities?
5. Why do we like living where we do?
6. What are the advantages of living in CWQ?
7. Why is our history remarkable?

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

- *Hardship and how we deal with it – an appreciation of stoicism.*
- *Communities and people get involved and support each other – there is connection, we feel alive in our connection, we care about each other.*
- *We tend to be strongest when we’re doing things that everyone can be part of.*

Advantages of living in the region were described as:

- *Safety, connection to the country, healthy lifestyle, space to grow up, and outdoors life.*

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

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

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

In response participants offered specific examples:

Economic

- *Sheep boom, the glory days of primary industries because prices were good and the local economy and employment was buoyant.*
- *Farm business cash flow improvisations like farm machinery outsourced to civil and civic projects.*
- *Monitoring of pastoral operations.*
- *Kangaroo management and harvesting.*
- *Local business diversification – offering different services to survive economically.*

Social

- *People volunteering to help out with events in the region.*
- *Developing e-Kindy at Aramac creating better social interactions for kids, building capacity for schools and creating something that can be replicated elsewhere.*
- *Renovation of the Barcaldine cinema – maintaining heritage while adding richness to people’s lives by providing opportunities for cultural pursuits.*
- *Revamping of the race track for big race days to create opportunities for invigorating large social gatherings.*
- *Getting the big events happening again.*

Environmental

- *Pest-proof fencing.*
- *GABSI scheme for bores and infrastructure saving water resources.*
- *Less visible examples of volunteerism included the quiet achievers e.g. Landcare.*

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:

- *We've got a good primary industry base, we can do better, there are some vulnerabilities but possibly we can address them with collaboration;*
- *We have a very good sense of community spirit;*
- *We have positives and we can build on them when we have more information about what is possible, what is needed and sources of input;*
- *We are well positioned to learn more about ourselves and get more information;*
- *Barriers to local and regional communication are acknowledged but can be overcome by cooperation across all regional groups;*
- *We're all going through the same things, we have common experience and a lot of shared commitment;*
- *Some issues are a lot more extensive and complex but we are learning.*

3. Imagining the region making the most of its strengths

The objective of this second session was to assist the group imagine what might be possible in the Barcaldine 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 Barcaldine region...

1. What would it be like?
2. How would it be different?
3. What if our region was to really excel at something in future, what could it be, what would it look like?
4. What external parties/factors outside the region are important to this proposition/vision?

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:

- *A place of opportunity to which our young people can return at the end of their education;*
- *A place where newcomers can move to find opportunities;*
- *A region where we are always improving what we're good at;*
- *A region with facilities and infrastructure so people want to live here;*
- *A more welcoming community, more able to provide for people who leave to come back and bring friends;*
- *Health care and education facilities equivalent to city standards;*
- *Young people choosing professions that will enable them to come back and contribute;*
- *An economy where people who want practical and physical work can still find opportunity;*
- *A community where young people contribute and older people listen more to the views of younger people;*
- *A region where people are committed to supporting local enterprise and where businesses are competitive so people will spend locally.*

These points coalesced into a shared vision promoted by the group which in summary was:

- ***A place where people can come back to - a place of opportunity that is engaged with the world and welcomes and attracts people.***

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 Barcaldine region.

4.1 Priority goals for the future

At the start of the session **the group identified a list of priority goals** essential in achieving the vision:

- 1. Stronger more connected more collaborative relationships within the Barcaldine region;**
- 2. Stronger more purposeful collaboration with other regions including other parts of CWQ;**
- 3. A stronger more diverse and resilient economy with opportunities for locals and newcomers;**
- 4. An open inclusive community focussed on the future where all voices are heard.**

After outlining these elements of a positive vision/dream for the future, the group **focussed on the main factors involved in its achievement**. It was decided to **focus on the following questions**:

1. What strategies and actions would help us achieve our goals?
2. How would we have to do things differently to achieve our vision/goal?
3. What would be needed to support and sustain changes?
4. How do we ensure the whole community has the opportunity to contribute?
5. How will community interaction/collaboration with local government work?
6. Who do we communicate this to?

Four breakout sub-groups were established, each one focussed on a particular priority as listed above at the front of this section.

4.2 Stronger more connected more collaborative relationships within the Barcaldine region

Opportunities within the Barcaldine Regional Council area to strengthen shared identity beyond local communities while improving communication and social cohesion were noted by the sub-group. It identified a number of areas of emphasis that in its view should frame further action:

- *Think and act as one community – members of the group would lead by example and have a positive attitude to opportunities for collaboration;*
- *Local Government should ensure more forums for people (including youth) to be consulted and have a voice in their community – effectively ensuring that the region consults with itself much more;*
- *All organisations should be more aware of their regional associates and counterparts and invite broader participation in local events across the different communities;*
- *A Barcaldine region social committee task force (people from each community) should be established to coordinate events and organise a social calendar across the region for balls, sports days, mixed teams between towns;*
- *Local Government should bring together annually a regional leadership forum drawn from all generations from schools to the elderly to discuss issues and ideas (young people to discuss separately, then join with older leaders);*
- *The Regional Council to lead the development of a Barcaldine version of the Queensland Plan;*
- *Change name of Barcaldine Regional Council to something which would assist the creation of a shared regional identity that would transcend the issues of local government amalgamation;*
- *Share information, help individuals understand how they make a difference;*
- *Establish a buy local scheme to provide business incentives to encourage people to think and buy locally.*

4.3 Stronger more purposeful collaboration with other regions including other parts of CWQ

This sub-group addressed the opportunities presented in developing stronger cross-regional collaboration between Barcaldine, its neighbours and other parts of Queensland. Participants came up with the following suggestions:

- *Define and brand CWQ as a region – create and market it as a regional identity/brand – eg clean green agriculture;*
- *Develop a committee or working group that represents each shire – to get people involved – to manage an events calendar to assist coordination and better communication across CWQ;*
- *Local Government to harmonise and ensure consistent practices and systems across boundaries e.g. road quality, feral animal control practices;*
- *Regional Councils to explore what individual communities could gain from regional collaboration;*
- *Regional Councils to explore specialisation opportunities across the region to deliver complementary capacities in different parts of CWQ i.e. where some centres become a hub for services across western Queensland (e.g. aged-care services) – communities operating regionally with distinctive value propositions;*
- *Proactively utilise communications and technology effectively to support more frequent whole of region 'conversations';*
- *Walk and talk 'regional' in government, business, media and social activities;*
- *Promote the need for change and collaboration in the community conversation.*

4.4 A stronger more diverse and resilient economy with opportunities for locals and newcomers

This sub-group explored opportunities to expand and diversify the economy in the Barcaldine Regional Council area. Suggestions included:

- *Government and industry to work together to create greater mutual awareness in city and country by establishing exchanges between city and country people, particularly gap year experiences in regional areas for city youth;*

- *State and Local Government should explore opportunities to develop higher education facilities e.g. TAFE, university in the region and also re-purpose existing unused infrastructure, possibly by leasing/selling to private sector;*
- *Tourism: capitalise on existing features and new ideas: Jericho drive-in, variety bash, selling our lifestyle authentically and making the most of our ecological assets, red-fin blue-eye, GAB and grey rock (sandstone rock, heritage site, Aboriginal cultural heritage)*
- *Draw case studies from successful local businesses eg GBA business workshop – how have they succeeded?*
- *Government should develop traineeships for property work to learn the way of life – for people from here and from outside*
- *Local Government and RAPAD should link to international think-tanks and external collaborators for ideas of how to stimulate regional economies and communities;*
- *Business should build stronger business networks and collaborations between towns, links and networks to assist businesses to be more proactive in addressing their needs;*
- *Boosting ag through greater use of technology including crops and hydroponics to take advantage of winter production;*
- *Encouraging businesses to utilise internet – communications infrastructure*
- *Develop strategies for increased regional use of renewable energy.*

4.5 An open inclusive future-focussed community in which all voices are heard

This sub—group focussed on values, attitude and culture and came up with the following recommendations:

- Build a culture of affirmation in which our community is more transparent and recognising of the people who are doing things (eg sponsors, volunteers);
- All groups should work together to function better regionally – ‘Team Central Western Queensland’;
- Build our strong community spirit into something less parochial and more regional;
- There may be alternative models and approaches – turn our skills for running race meetings into other tasks that need our leadership;

- Leadership groups including government should work together to help people be more informed about options, more informed about alternatives;
- Changing our practices and cultures to build and lead and not wait for outsiders to make decisions for us e.g. Locally owned and based health services;
- Stronger leadership by our youth should be encouraged;
- Our region should be a place where there is regional sport, reflecting regional collaboration.

5.0 Close and Next Steps

In closing the group re-formed into the whole and discussed a number of strategic questions to contextualise their strategies. The first of these four questions was:

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

- *There is great scope to improve the connectedness between towns*
- *We can be more positive and creative in the way we think about things and contribute to a stronger frame of mind in our region;*
- *If we think and act as a regional economic system we will break down the separation between businesses and towns;*
- *By being more proactive we can help our region get on the front foot and stop being so reactive.*

The second question considered in closing was:

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

- *The report from today should come back to us the participants;*
- *The Council, once it has considered the report, should share it with other councils within CWQ;*
- *Once the other towns have had workshops, combine the outputs across the region;*
- *Participant volunteers could provide presentations to communities;*
- *Each of us should walk the talk – speak about community more broadly and collaboratively;*
- *Stay involved in this process – we are all interested in being a point of contact for the council in continuing discussions;*
- *Talk to councillors and RAPAD about this process and ensure there is follow up.*

The final question considered by the group was:

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

A. What did we do today?

- a. *We've shared information and learned from each other*
- b. *We've developed a shared vision for the region*
- c. *We've set some goals*
- d. *We've worked from our strengths*

B. What was different about today?

- *We have focussed on the positives, not on problems*

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*.