



Institute for
Resilient Regions

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

**Barcoo Regional Council Workshop
21 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 even 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 includeⁱⁱⁱ:

- 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 11 community participants from across the Barcoo region was convened in the Shire Hall, Jundah on Sunday 21 February 2016. After a short welcome by Barcoo Mayor Cr Julie Groves, 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”ⁱⁱⁱ and that “...people [communities] and organisations are full of assets, capabilities, resources and strengths that can be located, affirmed, leveraged and encouraged.”^{iv} 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 what we can have for the community.*
- *See what other people think – see whether they feel what I feel – see if we all agree on where we're headed.*
- *Explore future opportunities for the ag sector (e.g. irrigation on channel country).*
- *Want the community to move forward, want schools in all our communities, don't want population to keep decreasing – rural communities still thriving.*
- *See what development future will be for Barcoo (Stonehenge, Jundah, Windorah schools losing kids) if you haven't got a school you haven't got a community.*
- *Concerned about the future of the three communities – population is dwindling, drought is important.*
- *See what everyone else wants.*

Workshop Outputs

2.1 Valuing the best of the Barcoo 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 Barcoo region while and 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 communities?
3. Why do we like living where we do?

In response to these questions, there was a range of observations, but a strong belief in the qualities of the local community shone through:

- *Resilient people – self-reliant, get on with it, do what needs to be done.*
- *Community feel, pride in our community, strongly community oriented, connected – friendliness, we look out for each other.*
- *It’s safe, it’s home, the kids can play where-ever, ride their bikes anywhere, you can make your own fun.*
- *We can organise ourselves to advocate for a future we want.*
- *The landscape – untouched natural environment Sand hills, water, wide open spaces, unique river systems, pristine rivers – world class; we are connected to our landscape.*
- *“We are connected to the land and the community”.*

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

- *We are a special niche tourist destination - genuine Aussie heritage – people can visit here to experience a more relaxed lifestyle.*
- *We produce Clean Green Organic OBE grass-fed beef.*
- *Great tourist and entertainment events - Windorah Bronco-branding and bike gymkhana, and camp-draft, Yabbie races, fishing Competition.*
- *Sealed roads.*

Social

- *Gender balance – women are in the workforce in all work places, women are community leaders and supporters (with some men also away or commuting in FIFO or DIDO employment elsewhere to supplement local farm incomes).*
- *We can organise ourselves to campaign and advocate for a future we want eg fought to keep the rivers chemical free.*
- *Our events keep people entertained, bring money into the community, and provide emotional and mental relief for people under stress eg Windorah fishing competition.*
- *We are willing to adapt and want the new technologies to better connect to the outside world for things like education and telehealth.*

Environmental

- *The landscape – untouched natural environment sandhills, water, wide open spaces, unique river systems, pristine rivers – world class; we are connected to our landscape.*

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:

- *Climate and water have a big impact on our local economy.*
- *We love where we live and want a future for our families here.*
- *We are strongly connected to our community and our landscape.*
- *We have adapted before and we will again to make a future here.*

3. Imagining the Barcoo 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 Barcoo 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 Barcoo 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 10-15 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:

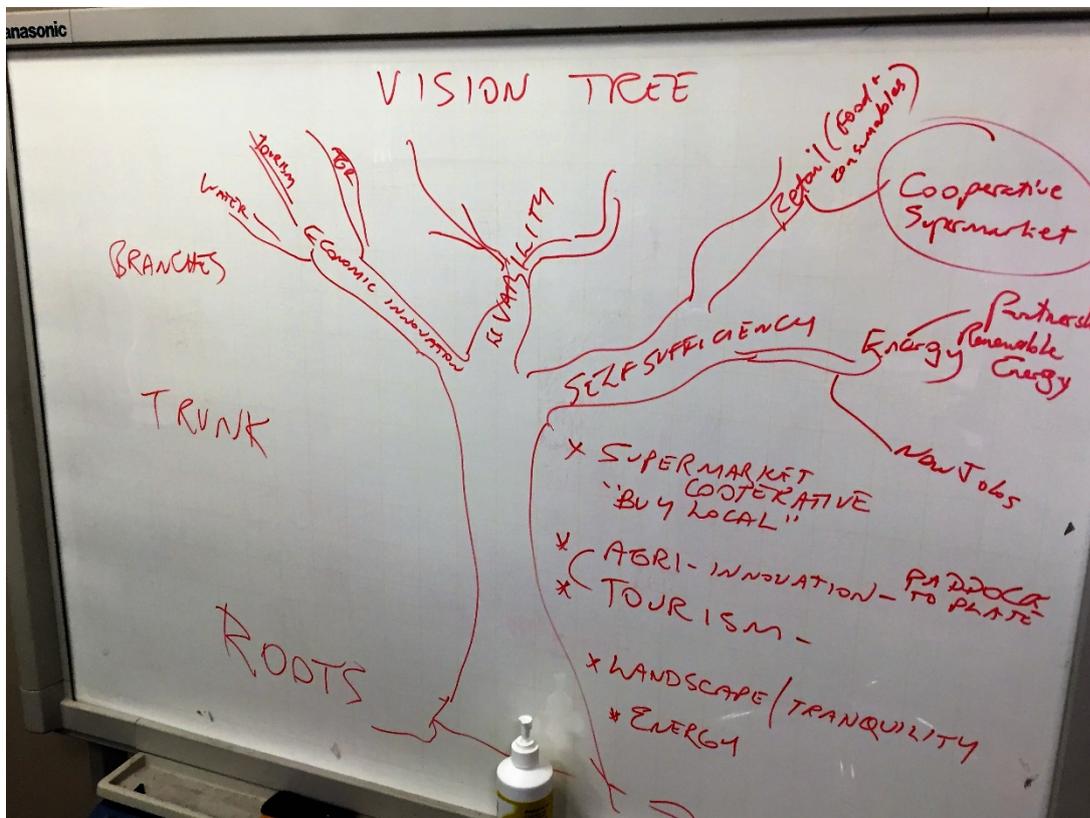
- *There would be more families, a place to come back to; more affordable living, more jobs, including professionals; our towns still thriving in 50 years.*
- *Water would be better utilised especially the huge floods that occur occasionally.*
- *Barcoo would be well known for organic/clean-green foods with our organic products marketed and exported.*
- *Food production would be boosted by innovations in primary production.*
- *Tourism and agriculture would make the most of opportunities for integration.*
- *Food tourism opportunities would be exploited with a paddock to plate experience - station cooking, beef and bush-tucker, enabling visitors to see, taste and buy unique food.*
- *Self-sufficiency and living affordability would be boosted by local cooperative purchasing arrangements especially in consumables.*
- *Renewable energy would be delivered through a locally owned utility working with private sector energy specialists*
- *Government regulations will have changed to enable us to form our own cooperative energy utility.*

- New jobs and skills will come from new industries and local innovation.
- For those wanting serenity our core character will still be the same – and people wanting tranquillity and peace will still find it in the Barcoo.

These points coalesced into a shared vision which could be summarised as:

Local liveability, economic opportunity, and greater self-sufficiency in the Barcoo will be achieved by:

- the community working together,
- innovation and new thinking and
- people being able to have a go.



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 points:

1. **Establish a cooperative purchasing network** to reduce costs and encourage 'buy local' from local small consumer businesses would positively benefit cost-of-living affordability and reduce shopping commutes outside the Barcoo.
2. **Innovate on farm production and value chain marketing** to enable local livestock producers a strong differentiation on premium clean, green, and organic labels in a global marketplace.
3. **Leverage tourism from the existing pass-through** visitor traffic (eg Birdsville Races) to grow Barcoo as destination focussed on agri/food experiential custom.
4. **Overcome dis-incentives and costs of grid power** through public-private sector partnerships building renewable energy locally.

4.2 Establish a cooperative purchasing network to reduce costs and encourage 'buy local' from local small consumer businesses would positively benefit cost-of-living affordability and reduce shopping commutes outside the Barcoo.

- *Study the form and role of cooperatives in building self-sufficiency and achieving efficiencies eg get advice from LGAQ.*
- *Ordering and supply, bulk buying – cooperative purchasing scheme (to provide lower prices, more variety).*
- *Getting existing businesses and properties signed up to bulk-buy arrangements – cooperative purchasing.*
- *Two different buying arrangements could be established to use existing carriers via Quilpie and Longreach.*
- *Cooperative to include some businesses and major properties.*

4.3 Innovate on farm production and value chain marketing to enable local livestock producers a strong differentiation on premium clean, green, and organic labels in a global marketplace.

- *Create an industry structure to finish cattle as well as breed cattle, value-add to our current breeding.*
- *Build consumer awareness by cattle stations having people come and experience it.*
- *Develop strategies for sustainable utilisation of flood plain water by local organic producers.*
- *Develop more explicit and higher profile links to clean green marketing food labels – possible join OBE.*
- *Collaborate with the tourism industry to draw on visitor traffic to build consumer awareness of local agricultural products.*
- *Draw on resources of QDAF to build the market development strategy for Barcoo agriculture.*

4.4 Leverage tourism from the existing pass-through visitor traffic (eg Birdsville Races) to grow Barcoo as destination focussed on agri/food experiential custom

- *Extend the tourism vision for Barcoo by inviting existing town based committees into a regional discussion to work together and with groups like Outback Qld Tourism Association.*
- *Re-think/re-organise existing events and resources, emphasising better collaboration among variety of local people, and marketing to existing organisations.*
- *Strengthen the relationships with other communities to build a tourism strategy that includes all the major communities in organised trips and travel.*
- *Integrate the green clean food marketing theme with existing events– e.g. beef markets/community markets (local arts and crafts) combined with the yabbie races; family and tourist events.*
- *Emphasise the quality of experience in events also to make them special - not just a feed at the pub*
- *Council to extend the infrastructure to receive more tourists – showers and toilets, basic infrastructure (steps are being taken).*
- *Train people to negotiate the regulatory systems covering tourism and food systems*
- *Combine tours of properties with restaurant outlets in town – collaboration between graziers and town businesses.*

4.5 Overcome dis-incentives and costs of grid power through public-private sector partnerships building renewable energy locally.

- *Council to lead a community conversation and with interested third parties on the opportunities to increase self-sufficiency through renewable energy in Barcoo.*
- *Council to discuss with utilities to make better use of the renewable energy opportunities here.*
- *Council and community to canvas potential private sector partners to install and develop renewable energy and storage capacity in the region.*
- *Council and the community to discuss with the State Government the regulatory changes required to support extension of renewable energy and local self-sufficiency in Barcoo region.*

5.0 Close and Next Steps

In closing the group discussed how to contextualise their strategies in terms of the way things were being approached in the Barcoo.

Participants were asked: "What do we REALLY need to change to make these things happen?"

Short observations in this respect included:

- *Working more closely across groups and across the region eg between towns and between primary producers and tourism.*
- *Think bigger possibilities with some of our events.*
- *Look outside government for partners on projects especially in energy.*
- *Think more creatively about how to use water without impacting on the pristine quality of our waterways.*
- *Study and understand use of small scale business cooperation to achieve outcomes.*

Time did not permit further consideration of closing and next steps, but there was good energy in the meeting and participants expressed an interest in follow-up activities and in being personally involved in developing some of the pathways strategies identified.

Particularly, there was strong interest in seeing the business-to-business networking around cooperative arrangements begin as soon as possible.

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

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

ⁱⁱⁱ 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>

^{iv} Bliss Brown, *Imagine Chicago*.