

New Ways of Engaging with Regional and Rural Communities: Strengths Based and Inclusive

Hampshire A*, Hunt J* & Winterton A

Mission Australia, Australia

Abstract

Much has been written about individual and community wellbeing and resilience. This paper examines two community engagement case studies from regional and rural communities in Australia, which aim to enhance both individual and community wellbeing. The initiatives have been developed by Mission Australia, a major non-government organisation, in partnership with local communities. They include both community and employment initiatives and improve social, economic and environmental outcomes. The paper focuses on strengths-based and inclusive approaches to building engagement and local community capacity. The skills, attitudes, knowledge, resources and mindsets critical for effective engagement will be explored. The case studies are the Regional Environmental Employment Program (REEP) and the Dubbo Leadership and Cultural Program (DLCP). REEP aims to assist young people in their transition to employment, education and training. DLCP assists young Aboriginal students in Year 8 (the second year of secondary school) who need some help to stay in school, to gain leadership skills and enhance their cultural knowledge and identity.

Keywords

Regional, rural, resilience, community capacity building

Introduction

In 2003 an estimated 64 per cent (or 12.7 million) of Australia's population lived in capital cities, such as Sydney or Perth (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005b). This means that more than seven million Australians live in regional and rural communities across the nation. These communities vary enormously in terms of a range of features such as size, location and population profile. Like all communities, regional and rural communities have been impacted by the significant economic, social, technological and policy changes experienced across Australia (and indeed the world) in recent years. Many regional and rural communities are facing a complex range of economic, social and environmental challenges, which are sometimes exacerbated by more limited access to a diverse range of resources. This paper draws on research into community resilience and wellbeing and highlights the example of two regional communities which are successfully addressing a range of complex issues.

Background — Research on community resilience and wellbeing

Individual and community resilience are key concepts in contemporary research, policy and program development. Resilience is the ability to bounce back or recover after adversity or hard times (Fuller 2001). The development of resilience in young people is now linked to long-term success in life and the prevention of negative social outcomes (e.g. National Crime Prevention 1999).

At a community level, resilience has also been identified as a key component of community wellbeing. The Canadian Centre for Community Enterprise defines a resilient community as one that:

“...takes intentional action to enhance the personal and collective capacity of its citizens and institutions to respond to and influence the course of social and economic change” (Centre for Community Enterprise 2000).

The Centre has identified a range of features of resilient communities, including:

- taking a multi-functional approach to sustainable development within the community
- developing plans that build local capacity
- mobilising key sectors of the community around priorities
- mobilising internal community assets (human and financial) whilst also leveraging outside resources to achieve community goals
- a critical mass of cooperating organisations through which locally based initiatives are implemented and evaluated (Centre for Community Enterprise 2000).

This list can be complemented by work Commissioned by the Australian Regional Women’s Advisory Council and the Arizona Health Futures initiative, which identified the following features:

- Creativity
- Social capital and trust
- Positive affect and attitude (Department of Transport and Regional Services 2001)
- Empowering members with a common vision
- Committed leadership
- Diversity in resources, skills, roles, relationships and perspectives.
- A culture of active learning.
- Access to skills and knowledge which tap into all the members of the community (Arizona Health Futures 2003).

Many researchers have highlighted the importance of local family and neighbourhood ties as significant predictors of community resilience. However the work of Healy and Hampshire in urban, regional and rural communities in Australia, highlights the importance of links *between* communities and to institutions such as government, business, the non-profit sector and media, as significant indicators of community resilience. Their work shows that in different communities, different institutions will play key roles in social capital creation and that non-profit organisations and local government in particular, can be key facilitators in this creation (Healy and Hampshire 2004).

As Woolcock concluded:

“...In successful bottom-up development programs, linkages to broader extra-community institutions are forged incrementally; a community’s stock of social capital in the form of integration can be the basis for launching development initiatives, but it must be complemented over time by the construction of new forms of social capital, ie linkages to non-community members...and links to ‘macro-level’ institutions of the state and corporate sector” (Woolcock 1998).

Mission Australia

Mission Australia is a non-denominational Christian organisation, which delivers a range of community and employment services across Australia. It delivers over 270 services in a diversity of communities in all states and territories. In 2004, it supported over 220,000 Australians in metropolitan, regional and rural Australia. Mission Australia aims to enhance individual, family and community wellbeing within strengths-based, and community capacity and resilience building frameworks. Two of Mission Australia’s programs in regional and rural Australia are:

- The Regional Environmental Employment Program (REEP)
- The Dubbo Cultural Leadership and Development Program (DCLDP).

The Regional Environmental Employment Program (REEP)

The Regional Environmental Employment Program (REEP) has been operating in regional Victoria for a number of years, predominantly in the towns of Shepparton and Bendigo. Shepparton is approximately 180 kilometres north of Melbourne and has a population of around 60,000. Its main industries include agriculture, fruit and vegetable processing and dairy product manufacturing. Bendigo is a major regional centre approximately 150 kilometres northwest of Melbourne. It has a population of close to 93,000. Its traditional reliance on manufacturing has diminished in recent years, with the development of strong health, education, financial, public administration and retail sectors.

REEP aims to:

- assist young people in their transition to employment, education or training.
- build community capacity.

The primary objective of REEP is the provision of support and skills development for disadvantaged young people to increase their chances of making a successful transition to employment and training opportunities. REEP aims to develop job skills, communication, team work, problem solving skills and initiative. Many regional communities face significant environmental issues (such as land degradation), but whilst REEP has an emphasis on the environment, this acts as a mechanism for achieving the outcomes for young people, rather than being an end in itself.

Each REEP program involves a team of around ten young people (aged 15-24 years) who are registered as unemployed at Centrelink and who face a range of challenges in addition to unemployment. These can include poor literacy skills, insecure housing, inter-generational unemployment, drug and alcohol issues and poor local transport. Participants' average level of education is completion of Year 8 or 9.

Participants in REEP are involved in a twelve-month program of nationally accredited training (traineeship). Unlike other programs such as Work for the Dole or Green Corps, REEP participants receive trainee wages, rather than remaining on income support benefits. A further difference is that Green Corp is a 26-week program and Work for the Dole is also usually of six months duration, compared with 12 months for REEP.

Participation in REEP is for five days a week:

- One day a week of training at TAFE, studying for a Certificate II in Conservation and Land Management. This training provides a direct stream into the Diploma of Conservation and Land Management, the standard required for many natural resource management positions.
- Two days a week on environmental projects undertaken for local authorities in their community. Participants undertake this as a group and the projects involve program partners such as Parks Victoria, local government and the Water Catchment Management Authority. The projects undertaken are diverse and include: conservation and protection of heritage sites; construction of recreational activities; bushland and habitat restoration; natural landscape management; garden establishment and maintenance; cultural, flora and fauna surveys; and revegetation work to protect and enhance diversity.
- Two days a week work experience with host public employers undertaking environmental or horticultural work. Participants undertake this on an individual basis and as paid employees.

This provides them with invaluable first hand experience of the workplace as well as a potential gateway to employment following the program. Host organisations include local and state government entities, local hospitals, schools, etc. — any organisation that has broad environmental work which can be undertaken.

The above program structure reflects the multi-layered model that REEP has adopted. The model acknowledges the need to intervene on multiple levels to meet the complex support needs of the young people involved. It is based on the understanding that having a number of agencies actively 'looking out' for their wellbeing, will increase the likelihood of them achieving positive outcomes. The model includes:

- *one-on-one* mentoring for a year
- *group engagement* through participation in teams, both for the environmental projects and with host employers
- *community involvement* through participation in projects in their own community and on the project steering committee, which operates in each REEP site. This strengthens participants' attachment to their community, which is a protective factor that helps build individual resilience (National Crime Prevention 1999).

The project steering committee at each site plays a central role in the development and delivery of REEP at the local level. The steering committee members are seen as partners in the program, with overall facilitation provided by Mission Australia. Participation in this committee includes a very broad range of stakeholders including youth workers, training organisations, environmental groups, state and local government, private employers, local community organisations and Mission Australia. Organisations who have participated on the steering committees include:

- cities of Greater Shepparton and Greater Bendigo (local government)
- Victorian Departments of Sustainability and Environment, Human Services and Communities (state government)
- Parks Victoria (state government)
- Goulburn Broken and North Central Catchment Management Authorities
- Goulburn Murray and Goulburn Valley Group Training Providers
- Goulburn Ovens and Bendigo Regional Technical and Further Education Colleges.

Without the REEP program it is unlikely that this range of organisations would come together — given the diversity of their interests and responsibilities. They come together for REEP because there is a common purpose and concern about both young people and the environment. REEP connects many people and organisations in the wider community who share a common vision — the creation of opportunities for young people through training and employment, enhancing

biodiversity and land conservation. Once made, the networks between such organisations are used, not only to address the needs of the REEP program, but also to address and solve other community issues that arise (e.g. use of public parks, recreational facilities, water conservation and drought). In this way there is a strong community capacity building component to REEP. Each steering committee is chaired by a prominent and respected local community representative (e.g. local councillor, landscape architect, etc). The committee chairs have been key local champions for the project. In addition, the funding and supporter base for the program is diverse and includes both local and non-local organisations, including local businesses and community groups, local Aboriginal cooperatives, government, philanthropic and non-profit organisations.

REEP evaluation, participant data and outcomes

REEP was externally evaluated in 2004. The evaluation concluded that:

“...young people participating in REEP have predominantly had positive experiences of the program and achieved positive outcomes in terms of obtaining employment or returning to training” (Markiewicz et al. 2004).

REEP was seen as exposing young people to a range of work skills in a team environment and in a workplace context. It was also seen as providing females with a supportive environment in which to undertake non-traditional work roles. As one stakeholder commented:

“REEP is the most productive youth employment program for young people in the area...It is the most positive experience that young people can have to gain employment” (Markiewicz et al. 2004).

Participants who were interviewed for the evaluation expressed a high level of satisfaction with:

- the work skills they developed (all scoring at 7 and above)
- their improved communication skills (all scoring at 7 and above)
- their increased level of confidence (89 per cent scoring at 9 and above)
- the level of support provided (all scoring at 7 or above).

Aggregate available client data for the Shepparton and Bendigo sites show that approximately 56 young people have undertaken the program. On average, two participants per program are Indigenous, one-third are female and two have a disability. Of the 56 participants who completed the program between 2001 and 2004 the following outcomes were achieved:

	Within 3 months	After 3 months
Employed	36	35
Traineeships/Aprenticeships	6	4
Unemployed	4	3
Study	4	4
Start new family	3	1
Other	3	9
TOTAL	56	56
Total % employed/in training/study	82%	77%

As the above table shows 35 out of the 56 participants were in employment three months after completion, with the vast majority of them in the same employment. A further 77 per cent were employed, in training or in study — an exceptional outcome given the complex range of challenges faced by participants. Appendix 1 provides greater details on the outcomes achieved.

Stakeholders interviewed for the evaluation identified the following key features of REEP:

- The provision of a nurturing and individualised response to trainees
- An emphasis on the needs of the young people rather than the projects undertaken
- Provision of transition support and follow up after training (Markiewicz et al. 2004).

Stakeholders believed that:

- REEP had achieved a high degree of success in meeting its aims and objectives for young people during the past 12 months (91 per cent scoring at 7 or above out of 10)
- Participants' work readiness had improved over the course of the program (91 per cent scoring at 7 or above out of 10)
- Skills and attributes developed by the trainees were very appropriate (100 per cent scoring at 7 and above out of 10).

Stakeholders also held that REEP could be transferred to a range of settings but saw a key component for it to be accepted into a regional community as:

“...a lead agency representative who is committed to seeing it established, who has the internal financial and human resources to contribute to the project, the relationships with potential partners to elicit their support, the right networks to tap into and a representative who shares the values underpinning the program.

...The building of REEP from the bottom up through identified community interest and motivated project champions was believed to be an essential prerequisite for running a REEP program” (Markiewicz et al. 2004).

Strengths and challenges

Key components of the program that have contributed to its success are:

- the diversity of organisations involved in the program who come together because of their concern about the wellbeing of local young people. They bring a great range of skills and expertise — including environmental, training, youth support, employment and business.
- it addresses a range of needs (social, economic and environment), as well as an area of identified skill shortages (e.g. horticultural work and cultural officers)
- the model is multi-layered and more long-term than other similar programs, reflecting the complex needs of the target group
- the flexibility and creativity adopted by the program to meet the needs of the participants. For example, the inclusion of cultural activities to enhance the participation of Indigenous participants as well as the willingness of TAFE to undertake some of its teaching 'in the field' rather than in the classroom and to provide additional literacy support, to more successfully engage with participants.
- the skills and expertise of local REEP coordinators who are the main support person for the participants and play a key linkage role with organisations such as TAFE and host employers
- strong local networks are complemented by a non-local networks with a range of institutions
- a diverse funding base has been developed for the program (government, philanthropic, non-profit, business), both from within and outside the community. This includes the facilitating role played by Mission Australia which brings a range of infrastructure supports to the program.

As the evaluation concluded:

“...Where REEP has worked well there has been a good base of support from government and statutory agencies, community champions who have promoted and supported the model, positive opportunities for environmental works, supportive TAFE and Group Training providers, and committed and capable staff selected as program coordinators...”

Some of the key components of REEP also give rise to some of the challenges the program presents:

- The complexity of the program and the diversity of organisations involved means that if a particular partner is not able to meet its commitment or one component of the program breaks down, there is a significant additional stress placed on the other partners who may not have the expertise in the required area. This also places a considerable level of responsibility on the facilitating organisation, and in particular the local REEP coordinator and project staff.

- The diverse funding base makes for more complicated administration of the project as well as additional efforts being required to secure funding. The withdrawal of funding from one source can place the program in jeopardy.
- The complex and diverse needs of the participants require intensive and longer term support, which makes for higher per client costs
- The program's location in regional Australia at a time of significant drought is placing stress on the program's availability to secure both environmental projects and positions with host employers.

Future directions for REEP

As the REEP evaluation concluded "...the REEP model is highly transferable to other regional contexts if the pre-requisites identified are in place...". REEP has subsequently informed Victoria's new Regional Jobs Package announced by the Department for Victorian Communities, which aims to address skill shortages in regional areas. It has also been identified as a possible model for Indigenous communities in regional Victoria because of the positive outcomes achieved to date by Indigenous participants on the program. Mission Australia is currently working with an Indigenous community in eastern Victoria and eight government departments to develop and implement a model of REEP which meets this community's needs. In line with community capacity building and resilience frameworks, the model is being refined to meet the particular needs of this community.

The key features of REEP are very much in line with the research into resilient communities which were highlighted in the early sections of this paper, in particular:

- a common vision
- a multi-dimensional approach
- building local capacity
- mobilising key sectors of the community and internal community assets, whilst leveraging outside resources
- strong levels of social capital and trust
- diversity in resources, skills, roles, relationships and perspectives
- committed leadership
- creativity.

REEP confirms this research but also provides a concrete example of community engagement in a regional setting, which enhances both individual and community resilience.

The Dubbo Leadership and Cultural Development Program

Another program which Mission Australia is facilitating in regional Australia is the Dubbo Leadership and Cultural Development Program (DLCDP). Dubbo is a regional city in the northwest of New South Wales with a population of around 40,000. There are over 2000 businesses in the Dubbo local government area, 15 per cent of which are in farming. Education, tourism and retail are also important activities. It has a significant Indigenous population with over 3300 Indigenous people living in the Dubbo local government area in 2001.

There is a range of government and non-government agencies that deliver services in Dubbo and a number of interagency networks that facilitate the sharing of knowledge, expertise and collective responses to identified needs. One such network is Dubbo's Youth Interagency, which includes: the Departments of Juvenile Justice, Education and Community Services; Reconnect, Drug and Alcohol and Mental Health services; the Community Information Centre; the Aboriginal Working Party; and Mission Australia, which provides a range of youth and community services in Dubbo. In 2003, members of the Youth Interagency identified a shared concern regarding the increasing number of local Year 8 Indigenous students who were likely to leave school early. At the national level, school retention rates for Indigenous students are considerably lower than for non-Indigenous students. In 2004, school retention to Year 10 for Indigenous students was 12 per cent below that of non-Indigenous. The Year 12 retention rate for Indigenous students was 39.5 per cent compared to 76.8 per cent for non-Indigenous students (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005a). Members of the Interagency were cognisant that early school leaving was a risk factor for poor social and economic outcomes, both for the young person and the community and in both the short and long term.

A subcommittee of the Youth Interagency was established to explore the issue further and develop some possible responses. Mission Australia was invited to chair the subcommittee. This subcommittee worked closely with a range of organisations and individuals to gain a better understanding of some of the possible triggers for early school leaving as well as approaches that might help support young Indigenous students to stay at school. One of the strong messages from this engagement was that many of the students had limited or no understanding of their cultural heritage.

Following many months of work and discussion, including the securing of some initial funding, the pilot Dubbo Leadership and Cultural Development Program began in January 2004. The program uses a strengths based approach to support young Aboriginal students in Year 8 who need some help to stay at school to:

- gain leadership skills

- enhance their cultural knowledge and identity. A strong cultural identity is known to be a 'protective factor' that can enhance wellbeing (National Crime Prevention 1999).

The 25 students (roughly even numbers of boys and girls) who participated in the first program were all identified by the local schools as being at risk of leaving school. The initial year-long program involved a number of components including meeting after school on a weekly basis with Mission Australia staff who ran a range of activities based on the interests of participants. Activities included Aboriginal art, dance, music, gym and a youth participation activities in the community. Every six weeks local Indigenous elders participated in the activities. The activities served to engage the young people, build their skills and interests and build trust between participants and staff.

A key component of the program has been a number of camps run over the course of the year. They have taken place in different outdoor environments and gradually exposed the participants to more of their cultural heritage through the involvement of Indigenous leaders. The camps were increasingly challenging for participants, particularly in the areas of interpersonal skills and cultural awareness. The camps built trust, self-esteem, skills and participants' knowledge and respect for their culture and heritage.

Over time, as the program developed, parents and carers of participants were able to discuss issues with Mission Australia staff who are also being used by schools as a source of advice and support.

The outcomes for participants of the 2004 program included:

- increased confidence and sense of identity
- a more positive outlook
- greater involvement with the wider community
- continued participation at school by all, and for some, the identification of post school plans, which include tertiary education.

The program has been subsequently extended in 2005, with a new Year 8 cohort beginning the program, and the now Year 9 students continuing to be involved as mentors. The program has also been extended at the request of the Attorney General's Department and the Department of Juvenile Justice to work with students from years 6 to 8 who have been involved with the court system.

The critical features which have lead to the success of this program have been:

- the adoption of a strengths based approach to enhancing the wellbeing of young people. This includes identifying cultural identity as a positive contributor to wellbeing, building on the young person's skills and developing their leadership abilities.
- the shared involvement and interest in young people from a broad range of agencies and individuals, which led to the identification of the issue, shaped the response to it and which continues to be the hallmark of how the program is delivered. Whilst Mission Australia takes the lead in delivering the program, staff from a range of other services and organisations participate in the weekly meetings that the young people participate in, as well as on the camps. Other assistance provided by the range of organisations involved includes transport, venues, facilities for camps, etc. All of this is a key part of not only making the program financially viable, but more significantly allows for a sharing of the diverse expertise of the agencies involved as well as a genuine sharing of responsibility for the wellbeing of young people in the community. This program is an excellent example of positive collaboration in action and of mobilising the diverse assets and skills of the community.
- a longer-term commitment to the project from the organisations involved. Whilst the project began as a pilot, all parties saw the importance of moving beyond this phase in order to ensure longer-term outcomes.
- both local and non-local networks have been developed to support the development and implementation of the program.

Challenges that the program has experienced include:

- the diversity of organisations and individuals involved and their respective contributions to the program means that if one particular organisation or individual is not able to make their expected contribution, additional responsibilities fall to the other partners
- working with young Indigenous people from a diversity of community groups.

Whilst it is still relatively early days for DLCDP, like REEP, it has many of the features identified by research into community capacity building and resilience, including:

- a common vision
- a multi-dimensional approach
- building local capacity
- mobilising key sectors of the community and internal community assets, whilst leveraging outside resources
- strong levels of social capital and trust
- diversity in resources, skills, roles, relationships and perspectives
- committed leadership

- creativity.

Conclusion

Much has been written regarding community resilience and wellbeing and the key components for promoting such resilience. There is also significant evidence of the challenges facing many regional communities in Australia, including communities such as Bendigo, Shepparton and Dubbo. The case studies offered by the Regional Environmental Employment Program and the Dubbo Leadership and Cultural Development Program are positive practical examples of regional communities working on key local issues in a way which enhances both individual and community resilience.

References

- Arizona Health Futures 2003, *Resilience: Health in a new key*, St Luke's Health Initiatives.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005a, *Schools 2004*, Cat. no. 4221.0, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- Australian Bureau of Statistics 2005b, *Year Book of Australia*, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Canberra.
- Centre for Community Enterprise 2000, *The community resilience manual: A resource for rural recovery and renewal*, Centre for Community Enterprise, British Columbia.
- Department of Transport and Regional Services 2001, *Success factors – Managing change in regional and rural Australia (Technical report)*, Report Commissioned by Regional Women's Advisory Council, Commonwealth Department of Transport and Regional Services, Canberra.
- Fuller A 2001, *Background paper on resilience*, presented to Northern Territory Principals Association.
- Healy K & Hampshire A 2004, *Creating social capital: What are the roles of Government, Business and Community Services?*, The Benevolent Society, Sydney.
- Markiewicz A et al. 2004, *Mission Australia Evaluation of the Regional Environmental Employment Program*.
- National Crime Prevention 1999, *Pathways to prevention: Developmental and early intervention approaches to crime in Australia*, Commonwealth Attorney General's Department, Canberra.
- Woolcock M 1998, 'Social capital and economic development: Toward a theoretical synthesis and policy framework', *Theory and Society*, vol. 27, pp. 151-208.

Appendix 1. Detailed employment and further outcomes for REEP participants, three months after program completion

Some specific outcomes for participants include:

- Employment with both private and public sector institutions including:
 - Goulburn Valley Orchards, including as manager of the orchard
 - Department of Land Conservation as environmental contractor
 - Parks and Gardens Department, City of Greater Shepparton
 - Parks Victoria as ranger
 - Land conservation, City of Greater Bendigo
 - Local plant nursery.

- Education and Training:
 - Environmental Science at La Trobe University
 - Land Management Diploma at TAFE
 - Traineeship with Greening Australia.