

**The Success Factors –  
managing change in regional and  
rural Australia**

**report commissioned by**

**Regional Women's Advisory  
Council**



Also available –

**The Success Factors – managing change in regional and rural Australia:  
Technical report**

The Technical Report is a comprehensive report on the research, including a detailed statistical analysis of the results and extensive references.

Further information on the Regional Women’s Advisory Council and the action research project reports can be obtained from:

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# Foreword

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Managing change successfully is a challenge. This report documents how seven communities in regional, rural and remote Australia have managed change. It focuses on how these communities, in a diversity of locations and environments, have answered a call to do it better. It offers suggestions of ways to manage the change and come through the process with communities that are prosperous and caring, and alive with opportunities for everyone.

A variety of factors combined to make this project special and the findings important. These factors include:

- the project being a team effort;
- the large number of individuals, as well as families, community groups, governments and even Federal Ministers who worked together in respectful partnership;
- the innovative use of action research and open systems theory; and
- a commitment to listen, hear and respond to the perspectives of women who live in rural, regional and remote Australia.

The project began with a question from the Minister for Transport and Regional Services. It received active support from the staff in the Minister's Office and encouragement and commitment from the Department of Transport and Regional Services. There was a strong belief that this was a project worth financing, and resources were made available. An independent facilitator and researchers were contracted to undertake the research. Members of the Regional Women's Advisory Council provided input on rural sociology, access to local and regional networks, and with the participant communities, generous gifts of time, energy, enthusiasm and dedication.

Using an action research approach has given this project flexibility. It has allowed all participants in the research to learn and to modify the process. The result, "The Success Factors," acknowledges that great change is taking place and everyone is touched. It also offers a way forward. As well as this report, each of the participants receives a detailed summary of the research carried out in their community. This includes the results of the questionnaire; the workshop proceedings and profiles of individuals who have helped their community manage change.

"The Success Factors" is not an end in itself. Members of the Regional Women's Advisory Council hope that "The Success Factors" provides a starting point for many more communities to take up the challenge of successfully managing change. There are many resources available to assist communities, and, as this research shows, it is the determination of the individuals and their commitment to become involved which makes the difference. As one of the participants said, "We just get in there and do it!"

For managing the project, I would like to acknowledge and thank the staff of the Regional and Rural Women's Unit within the Department of Transport and Regional Services.

For their willingness to be involved and generosity in sharing their experiences, skills and knowledge, thanks to the communities of Denmark (WA), Griffith (NSW), Ceduna (SA), Hamilton (Vic), Devonport (Tas), Tennant Creek (NT), and Cloncurry (Qld).

Thanks to the researchers and independent facilitator for their total commitment and belief that all women's voices have a right to be heard.

To members of the Regional Women's Advisory Council who brokered the project and found new ways of overcoming traditional barriers, a warm and sincere thank-you.

And finally to the Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services, the Hon John Anderson MP, who had the wisdom to ask the question and has the courage to listen to our answer, I commend this report.

CATHY MCGOWAN  
Chair  
Regional Women's Advisory Council  
26 September 2001

# Executive summary

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The purpose of this research was:

*To identify the critical success factors, particularly those relating to community capacity (human capital) that facilitate the economic/employment, social and environmental outcomes for communities experiencing change.*

In 1999, the Hon John Anderson MP, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services, asked, “What is it that makes some regional, rural and remote communities ‘work’ while other communities struggle?” and “How can Government support communities?”. As he consulted with communities around the country, he noted two quite different types of response to change.

The first type is presented in this study as ‘successful at managing change’. It is characterised by an enthusiastic ‘do it yourself’ approach. The residents of these communities are ‘up and at it’ people.

The second general type of response is seen in communities that appear to be overwhelmed by change and have not as yet, begun to deal with it. The Minister wanted to know what made the difference.

The Minister asked the Regional Women’s Advisory Council (the Council) to identify and advise on the characteristics of communities that successfully deal with change. In response, the Council commissioned an action research project in regional, rural and remote communities across Australia, during 2000 and 2001. The Regional and Rural Women’s Unit within the Department of Transport and Regional Services managed the project and were active members of the research team..

Action research was conducted in seven diverse communities across Australia, covering each State and the Northern Territory. Each was considered by external observers to be successful. The communities chosen were:

- Denmark (Western Australia)
- Griffith (New South Wales)
- Ceduna (South Australia)
- Hamilton (Victoria)
- Devonport (Tasmania)
- Tennant Creek (Northern Territory), and
- Cloncurry (Queensland).

Rapid global and national economic and social change has profoundly affected rural and regional Australia. Such changes as migration to the coastal belt, relocation of services from smaller to larger centres and industrial restructuring along with improvements in efficiency, have left rural and regional Australia scrambling to adapt.

Evidence of the impacts of these changes includes:

- young people are leaving to find education, employment and greater self-esteem
- volunteers are ageing and burning out as demand for their services increases, and
- others are reluctant to get involved.

Previous studies have shown that not all communities are coping well with the changes and the resulting uncertainty – but some are. The seven communities in this study were selected because they were judged to be relatively successful at managing this change and could be expected to be able to identify the major factors that had contributed to their success.

A program of action research was conducted in these seven communities, with women who were selected by the communities themselves. Women have long been the backbone of community volunteering and are responsible for many of the success stories in Australia today. The views of these rural and regional women needed to be heard clearly and strongly.

The project was done in two phases. The first phase involved the first three communities and explored all the factors/variables and the best way of approaching them in rural and regional Australia. The second reviewed all the findings of the first phase and developed a standardised research format and process to apply to the remaining four communities. The research comprised workshop and questionnaire components and had the explicit joint purposes of making a contribution to:

- knowledge about the factors in successful community development, and
- the communities with which it worked, through its action component in particular.

It integrated workshop and questionnaire data in its search for the major factors in, and barriers to, success at managing change, including and testing all major factors and barriers found in previous studies, in the words the women in the exploratory phase used in their workshops.

The *major finding* of this study is that the way the women feel about their communities:

- makes the largest direct contribution to ratings of success at managing change, and
- is the link between the factors involved in being successful and those ratings of success.

Conceptual factors ↔ sense of community ↔ **positive feelings** ↔ success

Questionnaire data showed the factors, grouped into their concepts, led to a sense of community that then led to positive feelings about the community and ratings of success. However, the workshop data showed that when the women became more positive, they also had a greater sense of community and determination to do more. Factors in success, a sense of community and feeling positive spiral upwards together to produce more success.

While feelings have been implicated as important factors in other studies, this study appears to be the first to identify them as the single most important success factor in managing change. This is demonstrated by the following findings:

- positive feelings make the largest contribution to high ratings of success

- negative feelings make the largest contribution to low ratings of success
- trust was the only factor that made an additional contribution to success, and
- the reluctance to get involved was the only factor that made an additional contribution to a lack of success.

Statistical analyses found that the factors that make the largest contribution to ‘positive feelings’ are volunteering and a set of factors that lead to more ideal communities (called ‘ideals’ in this report). These ideals are:

- a sense of belonging, or in this case, sense of community
- caring for, and cultivating, growth
- ‘doing good’ for all people, and
- appreciating beauty and the importance of leading full lives in a healthy environment.

Confirming previous studies, we found that the factors that make the largest contribution to the set of ideals are:

- working in responsible, democratic groups
- trust and an environment that encourages this trust
- strong community leaders, and
- creativity.

The barriers that make the largest contribution to the development of negative feelings about communities are:

- economic rationalism at the local level (demonstrated by ‘not including the broader community in future planning’, and ‘not planning for the next generation of leaders and volunteers’)
- superficiality (‘the amount of drug and alcohol use’), and
- ‘inadequate support for rural and regional Australia’ (which is linked to, or results from, economic rationalism at the national level).

The identification of economic rationalism and the reluctance to get involved as major barriers illustrate trends that have developed in Australian culture over time. The workshop data also showed that social polarisation, described in this report as ‘making distinctions between people’, is a widespread barrier. This finding supports another recent Australian study and suggests there has been a major shift in Australian culture – there was no evidence of social polarisation twenty years ago.

The women also frequently mentioned social engineering as having had a significant impact on their communities. This reflects recent economic and social changes and confirms that these changes have profoundly affected rural and regional Australia.

This study has reaffirmed the vital importance of volunteering in rural and regional communities. However, it also shows that the reluctance by many to make a commitment is significantly reducing the rate of volunteering. When younger people in particular see others being reluctant to get involved in community activities, it reduces the chance that they will volunteer.

As demographers suggest, smaller centres will continue to be most affected by social and economic change and they are at greater risk of becoming demoralised over time. Younger people need more opportunities to create and implement their own ways of increasing the community’s options, viability and quality of life.

The study suggests a strategy to simultaneously achieve:

- an increase in volunteering
- a reduction in people's reluctance to get involved, and
- more widespread success.

The critical factor is to get more people involved. Volunteering is contagious – it leads to more volunteering. The strategy translates into a further program of action research focusing on smaller centres and young people – the future leaders.

This program requires an additional workshop component to train a selection of rural and regional people in the best principles and practices of action research. This would:

- avoid potential problems
- build further capacity to manage change successfully
- reduce dependence on outside resources, and
- increase the chances of sustainability.

The workshop could itself be a motivating and energising experience, generating more of the positive feelings that have been critical to success in managing change.

# Major findings of the study and implications

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Some of the following findings of this study would appear to have implications for policy-making at all levels of government, and for organisations working in rural and regional Australia.

1. The demographic and industrial diversity of rural and regional Australia was confirmed. Communities also identified a diverse range of barriers they had encountered. People from different generations and backgrounds felt differently about changes in their communities. The extent of this diversity confirms that ‘one size definitely does not fit all’ in rural and regional Australia.
2. Volunteering has consistently been identified in the study as a critical factor for the future success of rural and regional communities. It has been the single most important factor in people feeling good about their communities, and hence working for their communities’ greater success. Yet the rate of volunteering is declining at a time when it is most needed to increase. Older volunteers are burning out and younger people are being discouraged from participating by the prevalence of barriers that make them feel negative about their communities.
3. The most serious barrier identified was people feeling negative about their community. The second most serious barrier was the reluctance of some to get involved. When young people see this reluctance in others, they are less likely to volunteer themselves. The women put ‘giving kids opportunities to be involved’ high on their list of important factors – they consider it critical that these opportunities are provided. Young people can work together in responsible groups, creating and implementing their own solutions to the dilemmas they face. In the process, they gain a sense of purpose. These dilemmas include inadequate educational and employment opportunities and a lack of recognition of their achievements. If youth continues to desert rural and regional Australia, where will the next generation of leaders and volunteers come from?
4. Economic rationalism contributed most powerfully to negative feelings. Communities want to, and given half a chance can, overcome their barriers – particularly those at the local level. Discrete problems, such as the level of drug and alcohol use, have led some to develop negative feelings about their communities. However, they have also been the catalyst for older volunteers to initiate community action. Broad State, national and international policies or philosophies, such as economic rationalism, present greater difficulties for communities. However, even here, some had made successful efforts to compensate for losses incurred within their communities. Once again the critical point is that some communities need opportunities to get started on the process of feeling better about themselves and developing success stories.
5. This study has improved our understanding of how best to strategically intervene in rural and regional communities. It has also demonstrated that communities have significant knowledge and resources available to work together to successfully deal

with change. Communities have no problem identifying their leaders who can turn barriers into opportunities. With a little topping-up of this knowledge, and advice on how to avoid potential problems, more communities can successfully manage the changes, and resulting challenges, they are facing.

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# Introduction

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In 1999, the Hon John Anderson MP, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister for Transport and Regional Services, asked, “What is it that makes some regional, rural and remote communities ‘work’ while other communities struggle?” and “How can Government support communities?”. As he consulted with communities around the country, he noted two quite different types of response to change.

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- Tennant Creek (Northern Territory), and
- Cloncurry (Queensland).

The research focused on the factors that contribute to community success in managing change and the barriers that communities encounter. Importantly, the research reveals these factors from the perspective of women living in regional, rural and remote communities.

Women have long been the lifeblood of community volunteering and are responsible for many of the success stories in Australia today. They are well placed to identify the factors that had contributed to their community's success. The views of these rural and regional women needed to be heard clearly and strongly.

An action research approach was selected because it allowed the research process to adapt as learning occurs. This project did evolve over time, forming two phases – the exploratory and consolidation phases. The exploratory phase, as its name implies, explored various ways of approaching this subject in rural and regional Australia. The learning from this phase was reviewed and a consistent though flexible approach was developed and applied in the consolidation phase. This phase used the Open Systems Theory (OST) version of action research.

OST practitioners take the view that:

- research must serve the important practical affairs of people, and
- those who live and work in communities and organisations know more about their environment than the researchers ever will.

OST has developed, over the last fifty years, from practical work with real organisations, communities, issues and problems. It is built around the idea that communities and organisations influence, and are influenced by, the world around them. Action research works best when the researchers and those participating in the research form relationships based on mutual learning and equality.

# Changes over time<sup>1</sup>

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Change is an essential feature of life and reflects the underlying shifts in peoples' values and expectations over time. The speed of change has increased and also become more unpredictable, creating increasingly high levels of uncertainty about the future.

Among the external changes, we see shifts in global markets as part of a rapid and general economic globalisation and rapid changes in technologies such that the average life of a consumer electronic product is less than nine months. These changes affect jobs and the delivery of, and access to, services. Since the float of the Australian dollar, we have seen its volatility and become increasingly aware of the volatility of world markets. We have also become more aware of climatic change and increased variability in local weather patterns.

There have also been societal changes – both globally and domestically. These are reflected in constant shifts in values that gradually accumulate to suddenly confront communities with quite different perspectives and choices.

Australia has seen the cultural influence of 'the bush' diminish while that of the city has increased. Even small communities have to grapple with the increasingly diverse religious, economic, political, and social backgrounds of their people. The desire for cooperative and creative communities that encourage and build on their diversity is amply documented in the individual community reports from this study. Non-profit organisations have not been immune to this era of rapid and unpredictable change, as they have been racing to redefine virtually every aspect of their operations to secure funding and respond to changing needs and priorities.

Internally in the last decade or so, Australia has faced:

- national policy shifts
- competition policy
- industrial and organisational restructuring
- a global and domestic movement towards 'economic rationalism' – the drive for greater economic efficiency
- a shift from full time to part time and casual employment, and
- an increase in the prevalence of call centres.

The effects of these changes have not been felt equally around the country. From the mid-1970s, broader structural trends combined to work against rural and regional Australia:

- falling commodity prices, farm aggregation and personal mobility radically changed our rural landscape
- retail and financial services relocated from the bush to provincial cities, and
- the push for further education and training resulted in an exodus of youth from small communities to larger centres and cities.

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<sup>1</sup> For further detail in this section, see the Technical Report, Chapter 1.

However, this is not the full story. Recent Australian research has identified a trend for rural youth to believe that being successful in their communities is 'second rate' to being successful in the city. Few children in rural and regional regions see themselves having a future in their communities. But when asked whether this would change if they could have a say, or play a role in their communities, more see a future without migrating to the city.

Rural youth need opportunities to create and implement employment and educational ventures for themselves. In 1999, 80 young people (school years 10-12) in Delatite Shire (Victoria) showed how to overcome this devaluation of rural and regional Australia by becoming involved in community businesses. They have set up 'e-cafes' and local business support services in Benalla and Mansfield. These opened in 2001.

Changes affecting employment in particular areas or industries have variable effects across regions. Some regions have benefited from changes, while others have suffered. For example, changes in interest and exchange rates have different impacts depending on differences in debt levels, capital investment, industry profit margins and market orientation (focus on export or domestic markets).

Misconceptions about the level of business risk associated with investing in inland and remote areas appear to have led to greater difficulty in obtaining investment capital. If this is true, it may be timely for rural and regional Australia to accelerate promotion of its potential and welcoming support of further investment.

This complex interaction of external and internal change constantly confronts rural and regional communities with new pressures and realities. It means that these communities must be prepared for the ever changing perspectives on such factors as service delivery, environmental sustainability and reconciliation. These communities are now more uncertain about their possible futures. Our seven communities were conscious of this uncertainty and its negative effects, but they have pushed on regardless.

The nature and impact of these changes is documented through a variety of demographic and social statistics, showing differences between Australia's metropolitan and rural and regional communities. This data validates the women's observations of the effects of change on their communities and emphasises the importance of the priority they have assigned to procuring opportunities for their children and grandchildren.

## **Population**

While Australia's population, including that of rural and regional areas, has continued to grow in absolute terms, there have been major internal migrations. Australians have been leaving inland rural towns and migrating, primarily to the coastal belts. This was particularly noticeable in the period 1976–1996 and has been labelled a shift to 'beach culture'. This shift illustrates the increasing importance of 'lifestyle' factors in decision-making.

Small towns with fewer than 2000 people have been the main big losers while the main winners have been centres within 75 km of State capitals. This migration to the

cities has been particularly marked among younger people, resulting in a rapidly increasing age profile in rural and regional communities. The exception to this is some small communities with a very high Indigenous population.

### Shifts in the Australian Population over the 20<sup>th</sup> Century

Variable	Beginning of 20 <sup>th</sup> Century	End of 20 <sup>th</sup> Century	% change
Percentage living in capital cities	32	64	100.0
Percentage living in coastal cities	7	19	171.4
Percentage living in 'the bush'	61	17	-72.1

While the loss of population in rural and regional Australia, in percentage terms, is of general concern, of greater importance is the decline in numbers of rural youth. This structural social shift has an impact on the economic wellbeing of a community and also on the sense of vitality within that community.

The only places to experience an influx of young people are some of the remote regions of the Northern Territory and Western Australia. In these regions, young people are seeking work in pastoralism, mining or tourism.

Unemployment has decreased in the last few years but is generally higher in rural and regional areas. There has also been a decrease in youth unemployment in non-metropolitan areas but this is partly because of migration to areas offering better opportunities.

The need to survive has motivated some of our communities. This study reports on community efforts to turn potential 'ghost towns' into sustainable communities supporting viable industries and providing employment opportunities and a high quality of life for their current and future generations.

### Industrial base

Cumulative structural and social changes have produced a range of impacts on industry across the country. In rural and regional Australia, the big loser, in terms of employment and contribution to GDP, has been agriculture. This sector has encountered very patchy incomes as commodity prices crashed and, to varying degrees, recovered. Wool experienced the most dramatic collapse in prices.

Other impacts have included:

- a small increase in manufacturing across rural and regional Australia, mainly due to efforts to diversify and add value to primary produce
- a widespread increase in tourism
- a boom in services – but these services have been relocated from smaller to larger centres
- the closure of banks, schools and health facilities, and
- difficulties with telecommunications.

Despite these difficulties, in March 1999, 47.8% of Australian farms had a computer and 18.5% of Australian farms had internet access. These figures are not much lower

than those for capital city households. The agricultural sector, despite all its difficulties, is further improving its efficiency and moving with the times.

## **Social outcomes**

Incomes vary constantly across rural and regional Australia as conditions and prices change. However, in 1996–97, the average taxable income for non-metropolitan areas was \$28,539. This was \$4200 lower than the national average of \$31,374.

The aggregate debt of farm businesses has risen steadily since 1986–87, when the current series of measurements began. During the 1997–99 period, there was a 12% increase in aggregate debt, although this was not evenly distributed. While about 30% of farm businesses owed more than \$200,000, 24% were debt free.

Other forms of income in rural and regional Australia include Commonwealth Government funding for local government. In 1995–96, this averaged \$73.22 per capita for non-metropolitan areas, and \$26.04 for metropolitan areas. There is a general tendency for such funding to be higher in more remote areas, where there is a low population base but a need to maintain important facilities.

In 1996 more families received some sort of government pension or benefit in non-metropolitan (33.8%) than metropolitan Australia (28.7%). The total dependency ratio<sup>2</sup> was 56.4 in non-metropolitan and 47.8 in metropolitan Australia. However, there were regional variations due to different concentrations of retired people and higher numbers of children in areas with high Indigenous populations.

The women in our sample valued education highly and have understandably concentrated many of their efforts on increasing educational opportunities for their communities. In 1996, non-capital city locations had very high levels of early school leaving and low levels of higher qualifications. Forty-seven percent of students in towns with populations less than 10,000 left school at 15 years or younger. Participation rates for 16 year olds drop rapidly as remoteness increases although there was a very small increase between 1991 and 1996 in the percentage of 16 year olds attending school in the very remote areas. This is good news for the very remote areas but definitely not good news for the less remote.

People with a bachelor degree or higher accounted for 6.6% of the population in non-metropolitan areas and 12.6% in the metropolitan areas. This increased by a significant 47.1% across the country for the period 1991–96, with similar rates in non-metropolitan and metropolitan areas. These figures are vitally important for rural and regional Australia, as they influence communities' capacity to maximise the potential offered by technological change.

Today a good basic level of education appears to be essential if one is to be judged equipped to participate in the rapid and widespread shifts to a technologically based society. The historical lack of educational and employment opportunities, and the

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<sup>2</sup> Total Dependency Ratio is the ratio of the dependent population aged 0 to 14 years and 65 years and older, to the population of working age, 15 to 64 years.

devaluing of achievements in rural and regional Australia, appear to have been the main reasons people have moved to the large centres.

Socio-economic disadvantage is measured by combining several census variables. Areas with the greatest relative disadvantage have high proportions of:

- low income families
- unemployed people
- people without educational qualifications
- households renting public housing, and
- people in low skilled occupations.

The value for Australia is standardised to 1000, with values higher than this indicating a higher level of socioeconomic wellbeing. The average was 972 for non-metropolitan areas, and 1021 for metropolitan areas. This indicates that the incidence of socioeconomic disadvantage is more widespread in non-metropolitan areas and, in general, income is higher in metropolitan areas.

Almost all remote regions show substantial socioeconomic disadvantage. Towns with populations of fewer than 2000 people have been particularly severely affected by changes in the economy and population shifts.

# Summary of these changes and some implications

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While there are positive trends within this very brief examination of some of the major differences between rural and urban Australia, the general picture is one of cumulative disadvantage for those outside the capital cities and major regional centres. Of particular significance is the situation for the young people of this country. They have been found to be on the move as they search for ways to better their prospects. Labour participation rates for youth are higher than those for the population in general but, despite their enthusiasm, they are losing out in the employment stakes.

The ratio of youth unemployment to total unemployment was higher in rural and regional areas than in metropolitan Australia. The lack of employment opportunities is linked to youth suicide through a lack of purpose and a perceived lack of future. Youth suicide, particularly for males, and males in rural and regional Australia, has been widely publicised. The suicide rate for males aged 15–19 has risen steadily since about 1967, reaching a peak in around 1987. It is still running at about 20 per 100,000 people and is amongst the highest in the world. This highlights the importance of providing opportunities for rural youth to create their own futures.

The effects of unemployment have been extensively researched and they include 'mental ill health'. One of the most consistent findings in this area is that health begins to be affected at the time when people anticipate unemployment but are still at work. Job insecurity and the threat of job loss result in increased psychological disturbance, physiological changes and increased medical care. Privatisation of publicly owned assets was found to have similar effects.

There are also intergenerational effects flowing from unemployment and job insecurity. Unemployment may have effects well beyond the experiences of those directly involved. Little wonder the sample for this research was so concerned about the economic, educational and environmental basics that anchor the viability of their communities.

# Approaches to these changes in two communities

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The Minister's original question arose from his personal observations of the state of Australia's regions. Researchers have also found that communities such as Shepparton and the Latrobe Valley vary in the ways they approach change<sup>3</sup>.

Approaches vary according to whether the change is perceived as natural (as in a natural disaster); is seen as preventable or under individual control; is externally imposed; or is a gradual or rapid change.

International studies have shown that change that is imposed from outside and appears to be widespread, affecting everybody such that they are 'all in it together', appears to contribute to the emergence of self-reliant attitudes towards the change.

The two communities of Shepparton and the Latrobe Valley, while very different, shared some views of the recent economic restructuring and policy changes discussed above. There was significant disillusionment about the benefits that are supposed to flow from economic restructuring. Key impacts were seen to be social polarisation, primarily between 'the haves and the have nots', increasing insecurity of employment and depletion of social networks and resources.

In both cases, people saw 'hidden social costs' associated with restructuring. These included working harder and longer hours with less time for family and community voluntary organisations. People were demoralised, there was a greater sense of competition and less trust and they no longer wanted to work together.

In both regions there was a sense that the promise of economic development had not been realised. Residents felt they had pulled their weight and done what was necessary, but the social benefits that should have flowed from development were not forthcoming. There was a worry that growth in the economy might be undermining the social fabric of each community, at a time when they were being called upon to provide many of the services that were once the responsibility of state governments.

Yet while there were many similarities, Shepparton and the Latrobe Valley had dealt differently with the changes. Images gathered during the research in the Latrobe Valley included those of vulnerability, powerlessness and the need for care. In contrast, Shepparton presented an image of competence, independence, resilience and confidence. Communities respond very differently in times of rapid change. Our study of successful communities emerges from this backdrop. All the major changes discussed above were examined in the communities as they described the context in which they achieved their success.

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<sup>3</sup> Gibson, Katherine; Cameron, Jenny & Veno, Arthur. (1999). *Negotiating Restructuring: A Study of Regional Communities Experiencing Rapid Social and Economic Change*. AHURI Working Paper No. 11. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Department of Geography and Environmental Science and School of Humanities and Public Policy, Monash University.

# What previous studies found about factors in, and barriers to, community success<sup>4</sup>

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Researchers generally call projects like this, studies of ‘community development’ or ‘social capital’. Previous studies in these fields have identified many factors important to the success of communities at managing change.

## Factors in success

Community development has been defined as voluntary cooperation and self-help among residents of a particular locale. It aims to improve the physical, social and economic conditions of the community. It involves participative processes for improving the quality of community life with collective, and individual, benefits.

These benefits include:

- an improved physical environment
- enhanced services
- crime prevention
- improved social conditions, and, most importantly,
- a ‘sense of community’ or social cohesion.

Researchers see the community development process as holistic – the development of all of a community’s human, economic and environmental resources. A sense of community and community competence (its problem-solving ability) grow together.

Several studies have confirmed the importance of a sense of community, community participation and empowerment of the people in the successful management of change.

People are empowered when they take responsibility for the management of the groups in which they participate, to achieve their agreed purposes. Responsibility and self-management provide the power. These groups are participative and democratic and allow people to gain control over their lives and communities. In communities, people often work in formal or informal self-managed groups, sharing responsibility as equals. We will refer to them as ‘responsible groups’.

These democratic responsible groups encourage cooperation rather than competition. Previous studies have also shown that it is only within these groups that people can rise above individual self-interest. When people start moving towards more ‘ideal states’, they find it attractive and motivating, as it draws people together to improve their lives and communities.

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<sup>4</sup> For further detail in this section, see the Technical Report, Chapter 2.

The four individual ideal states, or ideals, are described as follows:

1. *A sense of belonging* to the community is the 'sense of community' mentioned above. People need to feel they belong to something at the same time as they value their autonomy. A sense of belonging is the opposite of selfishness. It is sometimes expressed as having 'community spirit'.
2. *Caring for and cultivating* those things that contribute to the health and beauty of the whole community and its environment. It includes all aspects of learning and education, and the idea of helping others to grow. Caring for others is the opposite of exploiting them. It is sometimes expressed as developing a community's problem solving capacity, 'learning exchanges' or increasing individual skills and cultivating leadership.
3. *Producing good outcomes for all people*, but not just their physical wellbeing. This ideal includes the development of **all** people as people. It is the opposite of behaving inhumanely. It is sometimes expressed as improving services and social conditions, preventing crime, developing businesses and expanding the diversity of involvement.
4. *Beauty*, or recognising and appreciating situations that are intrinsically attractive. It includes ideas of leisure as 're-creation' for a full and balanced life and appreciating the beauty of natural environments. It is the opposite of ugliness and is sometimes expressed as improving or supplementing recreational facilities and celebrating, protecting and improving the sustainability and health of ecosystems and their resources.

Having a sense of community has been shown to lead to good neighbourhood relations and greater personal and group power. When people share a strong sense of community, they are motivated to solve their problems and improve the way they deal with the problems over which they have no control. A sense of community is the glue that holds community development effort together. The relationship between participation, empowerment and a sense of community hold true for both men and women and rural and urban communities.

Previous studies have also shown that empowerment and a sense of community encourage creativity, innovation and productivity. Creativity and innovation are sometimes mentioned in relation to leadership, where leaders are seen as those with bright ideas or those who initiate innovation in a community. As mentioned above, creativity is encouraged within responsible groups and we would expect it to be closely related to that factor in this study.

Empowerment and a sense of community are also significantly related to physical and mental wellbeing and health. The conditions for empowerment and a sense of community are built into the design of some action research methods. In these cases, the research design ensures participants have full responsibility for the outcomes and the implementation of those outcomes. These methods, based on responsible groups, increase the motivation of participants to succeed in their efforts. This study adopted this approach.

Some previous studies have found all of the ideals plus several other factors to be involved in successful community change management. One of the other factors found is a form of inspirational and shared leadership. These leaders were found to have a clear idea of what they were trying to achieve. They shared experiences with members, listened more than they talked, and encouraged participation in

decision-making. They also recognised the inevitability of some change and sought to get on and deal with it.

The terms ‘volunteering’ and ‘leadership’ appear to be used synonymously in some studies. Volunteers/leaders are the people who frequently provide the environment for seeking ideals.

Volunteering is an important factor in community development as it is self-propagating – volunteering produces more volunteering. People who have received help are more likely to help others. This tendency was raised in this study in many ways and many contexts and proved a very important and powerful factor.

‘Social capital’ is a term frequently used today but it is not new – it was first coined in 1916. It was originally meant as an analogy to economic capital, where making a profit on an investment added to the capital base. Developing a community and its capacity adds to its social capital.

While social capital has become a fashionable concept, its meaning has become less clear. However, studies of social capital identify exactly the same factors that have emerged from the community development literature and, in addition, emphasise the importance of trust for the successful management of change.

Trust has been found to be one of the four conditions that contribute to effective or influential communication. The other three conditions are openness, acknowledging people have the same basic concerns and acknowledging we all live in the same world.

1. *Openness* means that situations and information are totally open to investigation and that things are ‘what they appear to be’. Lack of open information leads to distrust and inhibits agreement between people.
2. *Acknowledging people have the same basic concerns* means that people treat each other as equals. It is better conveyed by behaviour than words. When people behave arrogantly, others feel less inclined to listen to them or to learn or work with them.
3. *Acknowledging we all live in the same world* means people can have confidence in their perceptions of reality. When they see they all live on the same planet, they are more likely to plan and move forward together.
4. *Trust* grows as people experience the first three conditions. The first three, therefore, are known as ‘the conditions for trust’. As people become more trusting, their interpersonal relationships improve. They also become more open to each other and communicate better.

One of the least noted factors in successful community development is that of ‘positive attitude’ or ‘positive feelings’ about the community. Many studies mention it but not usually as a major factor. However, excitement and joy have been found to be powerful motivators that create energy, making others more inclined to get involved. We expected it to be important in this study.

## Barriers to success

Less research appears to have been done on barriers than on factors contributing to success. However, some barriers have been identified and shown to inhibit community development. Some studies indicate that people are being passive in the face of change while others indicate that authorities, experts or governments are becoming more active to compensate for that passivity.

The **passive** barriers are described as follows:

- *Social polarisation* indicates that people are moving apart, or distinctions are being made between people. It can show up as the 'haves or have nots', racism or discrimination against regional communities.
- *Reluctance to get involved* with others or with the community has been identified as a major barrier. People withdraw into their private lives and cease to take responsibility for public spaces or their collective future.
- *Powerlessness* indicates that people are becoming disillusioned and increasingly feel that they cannot influence outcomes. It shows up as a 'gloom and doom' approach to the future.
- *Superficiality* appears when people begin to live just for the moment. It means they have started losing some meaning in their lives and the motivation to live a full and rich life.

The **active** barriers are described as follows:

- The '*law and order*' response indicates that authorities are attempting to keep society intact when it appears to be fragmenting, that is, when there is social polarisation.
- *Evangelicism* is a highly emotional group response to a cult leader or idea. It helps people compensate for their loneliness when they have become reluctant to get involved with others. It is not commonly seen in Australia.
- *Social engineering* is an attempt by experts or other elites to compensate for people's sense of powerlessness by engineering outcomes to keep society working. It may take the form of quick technological or legislative 'fixes', or professional services that increase rather than reduce dependency. New specialised professions have proliferated and, increasingly, this new army is sent in to fix problems or to administer 'bandaids'. Needless to say, this approach is self-defeating as it exacerbates the isolation and powerlessness that created the problem.
- '*Economic rationalism*' or 'let the market rule' indicates that authorities and governments are resorting to forms of fundamentalism. It appears to be quite common in Australia today, particularly in the economic field. It can also be seen in top-down planning and policy-making which excludes the broader community. There are also social forms of such fundamentalist ideologies that tend to treat people as victims, or in need of therapy. As there is little evidence of this latter form in Australia, we will call this barrier *economic rationalism*.

This research examined all these factors and barriers.

# Methodology<sup>5</sup>

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Action research projects have a tendency to evolve and this one evolved into two phases. The first in which all the dimensions of the study are explored, and a second in which we consolidated the findings of the explorations. The project was intended to serve two purposes:

- to make a contribution to our understanding of successful community development, and
- to provide an opportunity for further successful development in each community.

Ideally, action research develops a desirable practical outcome, or plan, designed by the participants themselves. People grow weary of being ‘studied to death’ without benefit to themselves. One participant wrote on her questionnaire “My one hope is that there will be a practical outcome to this project, and not just the generation of lots of reports”.

Action research, which has a long history and some well established principles, works best when:

- it takes a holistic approach, as change, by its nature, is complex
- it treats people as people, not as objects
- it deals with whole units, such as communities or organisations, and the researchers and the researched have a collaborative relationship where they share responsibility for the outcomes through a strict division of labour. In the action phase, participants take responsibility for the content of their work, and the implementation of the outcomes. The researchers take responsibility for designing and managing the process so that the participants have the best possible conditions for doing their work.

This project observed all of the above principles. There is anecdotal evidence that it was of benefit to the communities, as the women are continuing their attempts to overcome the barriers they identified in their workshops.

## Criteria for choice of community and success

The basic dimensions of the study were hammered out in a series of workshops. The criteria for choosing communities aimed at providing a highly diverse sample. The research sites were selected to ensure the capture of:

- each State and the Northern Territory
- regional, rural and remote communities
- coastal and inland locations
- diverse demographic profiles (based on characteristics such as age, housing, and migration), and
- diverse economic activity and industries (for example tourism, agriculture, aquaculture, forestry, mining, service industries and human services).

In addition, each community had to satisfy the following two criteria:

- it must not have been ‘done to death’ or ‘workshopped out’, and

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<sup>5</sup> For further detail in this section, see the Technical Report, Chapter 3.

- its State/Territory member on the Rural Women’s Advisory Council had to know the community sufficiently well to be able to assess them against the above criteria.

To be judged as successful, communities had to show evidence of some of the following:

- cultural integration, including constructive Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships
- being ‘go ahead’ and innovative in the face of adversity – evidence of this includes industry development, service delivery and conflict management
- maintaining or increasing population levels, and
- a strong sense of community pride (for example award winners of local government innovation awards such as Tidy Town, Landcare and Regional Communities Programs).

## **Exploratory phase**

The exploratory phase covered the first three communities:

- Denmark
- Griffith, and
- Ceduna.

In these communities, slightly different questions and formats were adopted in both the workshops and questionnaires. This enabled the factors involved in managing change to be teased out, along with the best ways of approaching them in rural and regional communities.

After Ceduna, the research team reviewed all of the data collected from the three communities and the approach adopted for each of the workshops. The team workshoped the findings and developed a standard format and set of procedures for the action research component in the remaining communities.

The data review showed that the women in the first three communities identified most of the factors and barriers found in the international literature. A comprehensive questionnaire was then designed, using the same words used by the women, plus a few other items for completeness. It was piloted on a sample of 32 women from a different, but also diverse, set of communities. The sample was designed so that the answers were not biased by imbalances in income or age.

## **Consolidation phase**

The final questionnaire (see appendix A of the Technical Report) contained 67 items, including two for identification. It was used in Ceduna and the subsequent four communities. The final sample consisted of 290 women and the response rate was 63.3%.

The project components of the consolidation phase consisted of:

- one or more visits by the State or Territory member of the Rural Women’s Advisory Council to introduce the project and research the community

- one or more visits by members of the Rural and Regional Women's Unit to further research the community, interview women about local successes and appoint one or more local project coordinators
- the formation of a community reference group, chosen by the local coordinator(s), to select participants
- small group work
- an integrative and future-oriented workshop
- questionnaire data collection and analysis
- case studies of women with success stories, together with the collection of other contextual data
- integration of information from the workshop and questionnaire
- reporting back to the community through individual community reports, and
- reporting on the whole project and its results.

The final action research format consisted of three main components:

- use of the 'community reference system' whereby the community selected its own participants
- small group work to ensure a comprehensive range of responses to the major research questions, and
- a workshop to check and validate the small group work and help the community develop action plans for continued future success.

Four to six small groups, including participants from diverse backgrounds, were formed in each community. These groups met to answer two questions:

- "This seems to be a go-ahead place. How does the community achieve it?", and
- "What motivates the community to do it?"

Participants in the larger workshops were selected to ensure all sectors and demographic/interest groups were represented. At least one or two people from each of the previous small groups were also included. The workshops adopted the following steps:

- presentation of small group answers (on the original butcher's paper) to the question about how the community achieved its success, followed by discussion and integration into one community-owned list
- a parallel process for the set of answers to the question on community motivations
- the formation of small groups which described their most desirable community in five years time – reports were again discussed and integrated
- the compilation, by the workshop, of a list of the major barriers they would face in bringing about that desirable future, and
- groups self-selected around these barriers to devise strategies and do action planning to neutralise or remove the barrier. They then reported and discussed this work.

This process provided the continuity of action from present to future. The self-managed nature of the small group activities ensured that the participants fully owned their work.

Once the butcher's paper had been transcribed, it was returned to the community so that they could continue the work they had begun in the workshop. Similarly, a report was written on each community's work. Each report was checked by a number of participants before being published.

All workshop and questionnaire data were coded into its relevant conceptual categories and rating scales for these categories were created for the questionnaire data. For example, all items concerned with a 'sense of belonging' were combined into a single factor, called a 'conceptual factor'. This facilitated comparison of the workshop and questionnaire data.

A form of statistical analysis was used to produce overall patterns of relationships between conceptual success factors, barriers to success and demographic factors, such as the rate of volunteering. These patterns can be read like road maps. The arrows are added in at the end by the researcher to express cause and effect or 'what is most likely to lead to what'.

In examining the data from all seven communities, an additional form of statistical analysis was used. This analysis looked at one factor at a time to determine, for example, which factors were making the greatest contribution to success.

The final set of success factors, barriers and demographic factors were:

- *demographic* – time in community, age, socioeconomic status (SES), life activity or 'busy-ness', volunteering, ethnicity and language spoken,
- *conceptual factors in success* – responsible groups, sense of belonging, caring for & cultivating, good for all people, beauty, strong leaders, acceptance of change, creativity, the conditions for building trust and trust,
- *conceptual barriers to success* – social polarisation, reluctance to get involved, superficiality, law & order, social engineering and economic rationalism in planning and policy making at local and other levels,
- *positive and negative feelings*, and
- *success* at managing change.

# Results

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The results of the study are divided into two parts. The first details similarities and differences between the communities. The similarities provide the clues to be followed up in the total sample. The second part follows up these clues and analyses the questionnaire data from the communities to determine the major factors in, and barriers to success at, managing change.

## Results 1. Success in seven communities - similarities and differences<sup>6</sup>

The study tested the diversity of the seven communities to ensure that the sample was not biased and that the results could apply across rural and regional Australia.

### The communities and samples: demographic and economic diversity

**Denmark** lies on the coast of Western Australia and has a large hinterland. Its economy is based on a wide variety of industries, including tourism, fishing, agriculture, horticulture, farm forestry, beef, dairy, sheep and wineries.

**Griffith** is a major centre within the Murrumbidgee Irrigation Area of New South Wales. It produces a diversity of horticultural and agricultural crops, including carrots, sweet corn, tomatoes, lettuces, olives, wheat, maize, rice, barley and wine. There is also a major investment in eggs and chicken meat.

**Ceduna** is located on the west coast of South Australia at the junction of the Eyre and Flinders Highways. It is a dry land farming centre and its current major industries are salt, gypsum, oysters (aquaculture), wheat, barley and tourism.

**Hamilton** is the service centre for south west Victoria (the Western District), 285 kilometres west of Melbourne. Historically, it is the longest settled region of Victoria. Its major industry has been wool – particularly superfine varieties. However, there has also been investment in meat – both lamb and beef.

**Devonport** is a port on the Mersey River – the North West gateway to Tasmania. It is 270 kilometres north of Hobart. It is a rich and diversified agricultural and horticultural centre. Major industries include fishing, dairy, forestry and processing. Secondary industries include woven towelling, high grade carpet and cement. Devonport also produces a wide variety of fruit and vegetables.

**Tennant Creek** covers 21,842 square kilometres and sits on the Stuart Highway in the Red Centre, between Katherine (670 kilometres to the north) and Alice Springs (505 kilometres to the south). It is the hub of the Barkly Tablelands and serves a number of Aboriginal communities, outstations, huge pastoral properties and mines. Its economy is based on mining and cattle, with some investment in tourism.

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<sup>6</sup> For further detail in this section, see the Technical Report, Chapter 4.

**Cloncurry** sits on the junction of the Flinders/Barkly and Matilda Highways in the North West of Queensland – 763 kilometres from Townsville, with Alice Springs to the west. Its major industries are mining, cattle and, increasingly, tourism. It is also the North West administrative centre for Main Roads and Railways.

Geography aside, the communities proved diverse in many ways. Ceduna was the smallest (a population of 3,559 in 1996) and Devonport the largest (28,814 in 1996). As we saw above, rural and regional Australia has suffered a decline in population. With the exception of Denmark, the population in all the selected communities declined between 1991 and 1996. However, this has changed since with Griffith in particular, known to be growing.

Ceduna, Cloncurry and Tennant Creek had significant Indigenous populations. Tennant Creek had the highest (39%) and also had the lowest median age (28 years). Denmark and Griffith had the most people born outside Australia and Hamilton was generally the most homogeneous in terms of demographic composition.

The communities also differ in their economic activities and industries. This is demonstrated by comparing Hamilton, with its economy (until recently) heavily based on wool, and Devonport with its highly diversified economy.

The samples also differed on every demographic factor – closely matching their populations. The Devonport sample was the oldest, with an average age of around 51 years, and Tennant Creek was the youngest with an average age of about 41.

In all communities, the sample (participants) tended to be older than the populations they represented. This reflected the higher incidence of community participation and volunteering among the older age groups.

### **Examples of success**

Some examples of community success stories are documented in the table below. These examples illustrate cooperation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, commitment to multiculturalism, community promotion (including festivals) and fund-raising for community use.

There are examples of:

- establishing facilities, and support, for the disadvantaged, aged and youth
- providing additional educational opportunities of various kinds
- the introduction of new industries, such as the Blue Gum industry into Hamilton and oysters into Ceduna
- new businesses, such as a coffee shop in Cloncurry and tourist attractions in most communities, and
- diversification of communities' economic bases, either through new crops, industries or value-added products.

## Examples of community-based successes

Community	Examples of success
<b>Denmark</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Established a community bank.</li> <li>▪ Community participation in Harvestfest – raising money for community projects.</li> <li>▪ Established high quality community theatre and musicals.</li> <li>▪ Conflict resolution through setting up an Environment &amp; Resource Centre.</li> </ul>
<b>Griffith</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Making church ‘family friendly’ – built a supportive group for young mums.</li> <li>▪ Raising money for disaster relief through set price meals at a restaurant.</li> <li>▪ Established the Flickers Film Festival with many benefits, including opportunities for kids.</li> <li>▪ Established the Gown of the Year travelling show to raise money for community causes.</li> </ul>
<b>Ceduna</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Established the Oysterfest – brought community together and provided good advertising for the town.</li> <li>▪ Established the five star Baby Care Room in the town centre.</li> <li>▪ Established a Ceduna Information and Interpretive Centre.</li> <li>▪ Reclamation of the Yumbarra Conservation Park – involved Indigenous and non-Indigenous cooperation.</li> </ul>
<b>Hamilton</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Established facilities and access for the disabled and aged at Leisure Centre &amp; Community Expo for the disabled.</li> <li>▪ Established the Freezas Concerts (drink &amp; drug free) for young people, providing opportunities for local bands.</li> <li>▪ Built a mosaic sundial with Aboriginal motifs on the lakeside – raised awareness.</li> <li>▪ Established RICE project (RMIT International Community Exchange program) involving Asian students – bringing together rural &amp; urban.</li> <li>▪ Established RMIT campus in Hamilton – flexible learning opportunities.</li> </ul>
<b>Devonport</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Teaching Aboriginal culture and art – breaking down barriers.</li> <li>▪ Established Devonport Commercial Promotions (retail) – helped stabilise business activity.</li> <li>▪ Established and built up the ‘Toast the Harvest Festival’ – promoting local produce.</li> <li>▪ Sponsoring and settling refugees from many countries, increasing cultural diversity.</li> <li>▪ Established ‘The Playhouse’ – a full time meeting place for childcare, courses, library, socialising &amp; support.</li> </ul>
<b>Tennant Creek</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Established ‘night patrol’ for a safer community – became a model for other communities.</li> <li>▪ Tree planting and town beautification.</li> <li>▪ Murals painted &amp; information sites established around town.</li> <li>▪ Established Nyinka Nyunyu Interpretive Centre.</li> <li>▪ Established Stolen Generation Resource Centre.</li> </ul>
<b>Cloncurry</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Established ‘The Shed’, training in and producing and selling of Indigenous crafts.</li> <li>▪ Established Koutha, a trucking business in conjunction with Ernest Henry mine – providing training and employment opportunities for Indigenous workers.</li> <li>▪ Established educational programs on domestic violence and rape – increased access and attendance.</li> <li>▪ Established education &amp; local information about breast &amp; other cancers and local support for sufferers.</li> </ul>

While all these communities had been independently assessed as successful at managing change, they differed in their own rating of their success.<sup>7</sup> This is demonstrated by the following observations:

- Tennant Creek rated its success more highly than did Cloncurry, which judged itself harshly although its average score was 4.27 on an eight point scale
- Tennant Creek and Devonport felt more positive than Cloncurry
- Tennant Creek also felt more negative about itself than Devonport, and
- Tennant Creek felt both the most positive and the most negative about itself.

The communities obviously differed in the intensity of their feelings. We began to see that there were relationships between positive feelings and higher ratings of success, and negative feelings and lower ratings of success. The overall patterns produced for individual communities had also indicated that these factors were related.

Although the communities varied in many ways, they had some very similar views.

### **The most desirable community**

Here we see what the women were aiming to achieve in their efforts to produce a successful community. Regardless of whether the data came from the workshop or questionnaire, we find that six of the seven communities included the whole set of ideals.

Examples of *sense of belonging* included:

- simply that – a sense of belonging
- having community spirit
- solidarity, and
- self-reliance.

Examples of *caring for, cultivating* included:

- developing opportunities so kids can stay in the town
- teaching Indigenous languages in schools
- online education, with affordable access, available to all, and
- an international centre for innovative education.

Examples of *good for all* included:

- new industries
- value-adding
- a wide variety of professional jobs available, and
- everyone equal and recognised for their skills and benefit to the community.

Examples of *beauty* included:

- being spiritually healthy, with better recreation facilities
- town beautification
- a community cultural centre and leisure facilities, and
- an environmentally sustainable community (“with frogs” – believed to be an indicator of environmental health).

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<sup>7</sup> Only the five communities that completed the final questionnaire were asked to rate their success.

In addition, Devonport women stressed the importance of *creativity* – “a creative community - this is the beginning”. They emphasised the importance of new ideas and approaches to business. The multiple but consistent ways in which the women expressed their hopes for the future of their communities are detailed in the individual community reports.

### **Motivations to succeed**

Three out of six<sup>8</sup> communities identified the full set of ideals. The other three communities identified three of the four – beauty was not mentioned. The three that mentioned beauty were those with large Indigenous populations. This shows the influence of the Indigenous cultures in these communities, as the ideal of beauty revolves around appreciation of the whole environment and the importance of the land, including its recreational or ‘re-creational’ aspects, as part of a full life.

Statements about motivations were very similar to those regarding their most desirable communities and also the factors in success themselves. In addition, the Tennant Creek and Cloncurry women specifically mentioned taking responsibility for their people, their community and their future.

When we compare the most desirable communities and the motivations for trying to produce them, we see that every ideal was present in every community. Communities simply differed in terms of whether they mentioned an ideal as a part of their future or their motivations.

The ideals are a key to success.

### **Factors in success**

Combining the workshop and questionnaire data on the key factors contributing to each community’s success, it was found:

- all four ideals turned up in six of the seven communities
- the other major factors were more scattered
- five communities mentioned taking responsibility
- four mentioned creativity, and
- Cloncurry mentioned ‘strong leaders’– meaning leaders who support and work with, and for, the community.

All individual factors were considered important, as no factor had an average score of less than three on a five point scale (see questionnaire in appendix A of the Technical Report). However, it was found that these factors could not explain the ratings of success. **By far the most important factor in the ratings of success was ‘how people feel about their communities’.**

The individual community analyses also indicated this finding. While each was slightly different, reflecting the individuality of each community, there was a general pattern. The factors, grouped into their concepts, led to a sense of community that in turn led to positive feelings about the community and ratings of success.

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<sup>8</sup> A direct question about motivation was not asked in the Denmark workshop but the desire for the community to be self-reliant was mentioned.

## Barriers to success

The same processes were followed for barriers as for factors in success. An analysis of both the workshop and the questionnaire data revealed that only three barriers were found in every community:

- social polarisation, or making distinctions between people
- economic rationalism in planning and policy-making at the local level, and
- economic rationalism in planning and policy-making at other levels.

Economic rationalism was seen as the major barrier to success. The identification of other barriers was more uneven, reflecting the seven communities' different histories, demographics and economies.

The women were much more certain about what made them successful than they were about what was holding them back.

Again, the individual barriers considered most common could **not** explain low ratings of success. However, they were closely related to people's negative feelings about their communities. These negative feelings were, in turn, most closely related to a perceived lack of success.

## Results 2. The total sample - major contributors to success at managing change<sup>9</sup>

Both the individual community analyses and the community comparisons indicated that positive and negative feelings were the most important factors in determining how successful participants considered their communities had been in managing change. We pursued these observations by undertaking further analysis of the total sample.

An analysis of the demographic factors showed that:

- older women with a language other than English see their communities as more successful
- volunteers feel more positive about their communities, and
- Indigenous women, who have English as their first language feel more negative about their community.

These findings provide further evidence of the prevalence of social polarisation. This social polarisation was publicly labelled 'racism' in Ceduna and Tennant Creek and was implied in Cloncurry – the three communities with a high Indigenous population.

However, the single most powerful, demographic factor was volunteering.

Again we examined the relationships between the most important success factors, taken one at a time, and success. These relationships showed that these individual factors could **not** explain success. However, when we grouped the single factors into their conceptual categories such as the ideals, responsible groups and the conditions for trust, they showed strong relationships with positive feelings.

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<sup>9</sup> For further detail in this section, see the Technical Report, Chapter 5.

When all these conceptual factors and their interrelationships were ordered into a pattern, it showed that the conceptual factors led to a sense of community that in turn led to positive feelings about the community, and then to high ratings of success. This is the same pattern identified in the individual community analyses.

Conceptual factors ↔ sense of community ↔ positive feelings ↔ success

These processes were repeated for the barriers to success and negative feelings. Similarly, the pattern showed that the barriers led to residents having negative feelings about their community, which in turn led to a perceived lack of success. However, here the barriers 'reluctance to get involved' and 'economic rationalism in planning and policy making at the local level' also had small, but direct, relationships with the perceived lack of success.

This work for the total sample confirmed the indications from the individual community analyses and the community comparisons. **Positive feelings were most closely related to ratings of success. Negative feelings were most closely related to low ratings of success.**

When the success factors and the barriers to success were examined together, the pattern showed that strong leaders in the community convert barriers into opportunities for success. Most of the barriers act as background factors, while superficiality (drug and alcohol use) and social engineering (such as lack of skilled labour and replacing jobs with technology) provide strong motivation for the leaders to initiate action.

This finding adds to our strategic knowledge of how best to intervene in rural and regional Australia to achieve greater success in managing change. This study showed that communities have no problem identifying the strong leaders who make things happen. However, a future strategy must also encourage new, younger leaders to emerge. This issue is addressed below.

### **Analysis to determine major contributors to success and feelings**

A series of analyses were performed on the total sample to determine precisely which factors and barriers were making the greatest contribution to:

- success
- positive feelings, and
- negative feelings.

These analyses showed that the major contributors to success, in order, are:

- positive feelings, and
- trust.

The major contributors to lack of success, in order, are:

- negative feelings, and
- reluctance to get involved.

The major contributors to positive feelings, in order, are:

- volunteering
- the ideal of sense of belonging, or sense of community, and
- the set of ideals.

The major contributors to the ideal of sense of belonging, in order, are:

- responsible groups
- the ideal of caring for, cultivating
- volunteering, and
- the ideal of 'good for all people'.

The major contributors to the set of ideals, in order, are:

- responsible groups
- the conditions for trust
- strong leaders
- trust, and
- creativity.

As trust was found to make a separate contribution to success, we also examined which factors were making the major contribution to this variable. They were found to be, in order:

- the set of ideals
- the conditions for trust, and
- responsible groups.

These last two tests showed that responsible groups, the set of ideals, the conditions for trust, and trust itself, and then positive feelings and success, work together in successful communities. The most important thing for communities is to get started, on the right foot and with the right conditions in place.

The major contributors to negative feelings, in order, are:

- economic rationalism in planning and policy-making at the local level, and
- superficiality.

However, the workshop data also showed social polarisation, making distinctions between people, and social engineering to be widespread barriers. We resume this discussion below.

### **A strategy for the future**

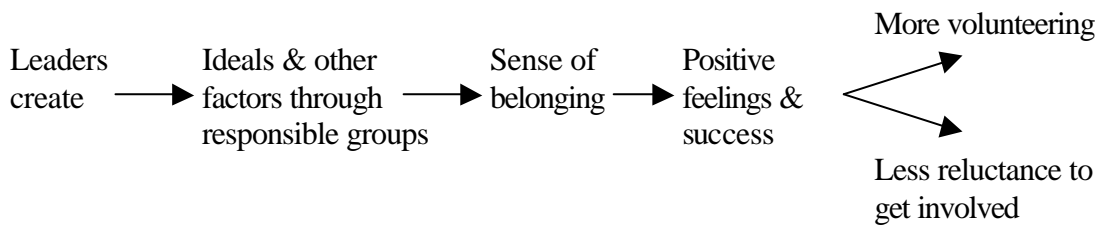
In order to further examine the strong relationship between high levels of volunteering and positive feelings about their community, two separate samples were compared:

- older women who do lots of volunteering, and
- younger women who do less volunteering.

This comparison showed that the younger women are much more sensitive to barriers and, as a result, have more negative feelings about their communities. The older women see the same barriers but are not as concerned about them. Rather, they are more likely to focus on the community's successes, which leads them to do more volunteering.

The pattern for the younger women presents a very fragile picture for volunteering. When younger women feel positive about their communities, they volunteer. However, the development of negative feelings about their community can significantly hinder volunteering. For both the older and younger women, the single most influential barrier to volunteering is seeing people being reluctant to get involved.

Isolating this critical link suggests a strategy to reduce reluctance to get involved. If that reluctance could be reduced, it would significantly increase positive feelings about the community, perceptions of success and rates of volunteering. A further analysis showed the following pattern:



By working with responsible groups, leaders create the conditions for trust, the ideals of caring for and cultivating, ‘doing good’ for all people, beauty and other factors. Once this process is underway, it leads to a sense of belonging, which in turn leads to positive feelings and success. The momentum generated by this process leads to more volunteering and less reluctance to get involved.

This pattern represents a strategy for simultaneously overcoming the reluctance to get involved and increasing volunteering. We discuss this strategy in more detail below, in the context of other implications for further action research.

# Implications of the results<sup>10</sup>

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## Factors in success

The major finding that feelings, both positive and negative, make the greatest contribution to ratings of success at managing change would not have been predicted from a literature review of most previous studies. This finding has two implications:

- the study needs to be repeated so that this finding can be confirmed, and
- the design of community workshops should continue to leave barriers towards the end of the research activities.

It is important that the workshop process deals with barriers, rather than merely identifying them. Developing plans to overcome barriers increases participants' positive feelings about their community's future and dispels any remaining negative feelings about how hard it is all going to be.

While this study has confirmed the importance of all the conceptual success factors mentioned in previous studies, it has gone further and shown that they are important because they make people feel better about their community. When people feel better about their community, they are more likely to see it as successful. This creates a sense of community and hope for the future.

The workshop data showed clearly that once people are working to overcome the barriers and move their community towards their ideal future, they feel more positive. Once this process is underway, a spiral of optimism and increased commitment to success can be expected.

The importance of volunteering has enormous implications for the future of rural and regional communities. In every community, the women commented on the ageing of their volunteers and the dangers of volunteer burnout. The barriers concerning burnout of volunteers and not planning for the next generation of leaders and volunteers were rated highly. Add to this the importance of 'reluctance to get involved' and it would be fair to say there is something of a crisis of volunteering in rural and regional Australia. If this were to become worse, it would not bode well for future success stories.

Volunteering and leadership are closely allied in the literature and in this study. Strong leaders were found to be the link between the barriers and the factors in success. The women saw strong leaders as people with bright ideas who work with others in the community to contribute to making their community better.

In reality the volunteers and leaders in these small communities are one and the same people. From this, one gathers an even stronger sense of their importance and the urgency of an effective strategy to increase their numbers on the ground. Young adults and late teens are an obvious source of potential new leaders.

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<sup>10</sup> For further detail in this section, see the Technical Report, Chapter 6.

As predicted, creativity and innovation, trust and the conditions for it, and responsible groups all proved important. The set of ideals also proved powerful and was shown to grow together with trust and responsible groups in successfully developing communities. Again, volunteering contributed to these factors and, in particular, to a sense of belonging. The ideal of beauty received less attention from the women because, as some noted, the immediate priority in many communities is to survive.

The importance and power of responsible groups in community planning and development has two major implications:

- many people implicitly understand and spontaneously work in small, responsible, democratic groups to achieve community projects and goals, and
- when larger groups come together, or when more formal organisations are created, the lack of explicit, conceptual knowledge of the theory behind responsible groups causes people to create top-down, hierarchical organisations, that later cause many problems and headaches.

In the latter case the lack of knowledge means participants cannot explain what has gone wrong and do not know how to fix it. This has been a problem with the implementation and evolution of many action research projects. However, there is a way of overcoming this problem. The answer is to include a second component in planning workshops in which people design an effective organisation to implement their plans. In this process, they gain, in simple, practical terms, the theoretical knowledge they need.

This research has found that communities that have been successful at managing change know how to be successful and use most, if not all, of the factors shown to be important in such success.

The addition of an educational component to future action research projects, and increased emphasis on comprehensive and carefully designed workshops where participants work throughout in responsible groups, would further enhance outcomes for sample communities. This would ensure that ideals emerged that could be pursued into the future.

## **Motivations for success**

The data from the questionnaire about the motivational power of positive feelings have already been discussed. When the workshop data about the women's motivations are examined it can be seen that, without exception, positive feelings were listed among those factors that motivated them. They were variously expressed as:

- having fun, a sense of humour
- joy, the 'warm fuzzies', socialising and celebrating together, applauding successes, seeing happy faces, makes you feel good, and
- being positive, having a positive view and energy.

Adding to this the frequency with which festivals and various other celebratory events were mentioned as examples of success, it is clear that the women are very aware of the motivating power of feeling positive.

Similarly, all the ideals were identified as motivating factors. This adds further support to the conclusion that action research methods need to pay particular attention to the use of responsible groups to establish trust, ideal seeking and creativity . This raises the probability of positive feelings, motivation and hence greater success at managing change.

Positive feelings have also been shown to be a powerful factor in the promotion, take-up and/or spread of new ideas or innovations. Promotion of new ideas and community projects is essential in order to maximise community involvement.

The workshop activity in which the women discussed their most desirable community was included specifically to develop group trust and plans to overcome barriers and achieve future success. It was based on responsible groups. Both participants and observers noted that there was an increase in the energy levels at this stage of the workshop. These energy levels were at their highest when the women worked on plans to overcome their major barriers.

Task-oriented work that is meaningful, if not vital, to the agreed shared purposes of any group generates additional energy among participants. As noted above, there is anecdotal evidence that the women in the seven communities are taking steps to implement the plans developed in the workshops. This indicates that one of the stated purposes of the study is being realised, namely that it should be of practical continuing value to the communities in which it was conducted.

## **Barriers to success**

One of the major findings of this research was that negative feelings were the second greatest influence on success. This finding would not have been predicted from most previous studies. Only the barrier 'reluctance to become involved' was found to contribute directly to lack of success. That barrier has been recognised, both internationally and in previous Australian work, to be one of the most serious and difficult barriers to overcome.

The fact that the seven communities studied had overcome this barrier to the extent they had, is a measure of success in its own right. However, even these communities experienced problems with the reluctance of many to 'join in' or volunteer. As one participant observed, "The same old faces kept turning up."

The other two most powerful barriers identified were:

- economic rationalism, particularly at the local level, and
- drug and alcohol use, expressing superficiality.

The research findings relating to these barriers illustrate two points:

- that Australia has a much more widespread drug and alcohol problem than it did in 1979 when it did not appear in the cultural record, and
- in communities that have track records of managing change successfully, people will make special efforts to overcome barriers that are under their control and can be handled at the community level.

An examination of the history of the individual communities showed that successful communities will also tackle barriers that are not directly under their control. Examples of actions taken include finding new or alternative sources of funding and researching and attracting new industries and skilled migrants.

The lesson here appears to be that success builds its own momentum. Successful communities develop a positive approach to change, confidence and a knowledge base of ways to pursue creative responses to change. The critical major point appears to be the start of the process. Where and how to start a process of managed change needs very careful attention. These questions are addressed in the next section – *Strategies for increasing success at managing change*.

However, we first need to examine the differences in the data provided by the questionnaire and the workshops as this may reveal useful lessons to guide future action research. Apart from the major barriers mentioned above, the full set of data only presented a patchy pattern, with barriers scattered through the workshop and questionnaire responses. This uneven pattern reflects the differences between the communities and the barriers they are battling. However, it also reflects the different ways in which people operate when completing a questionnaire and working together in a workshop.

Filling in a questionnaire is a silent, individual act based on literacy. Participating in a workshop is based on conversation that acts as ‘social cement’. It generates learning and the energy that prepares the group for future action.

The most dramatic example of these differences occurred when considering the barrier of social polarisation or making distinctions between people. Testing the questionnaire showed that rural and regional women do not respond to questions concerning ‘taboo’ subjects such as ‘racism’. But in the carefully designed and protected environments of the workshops, the women demonstrated courage and named these barriers. In some cases, they admitted to ‘holding their breath’ as they publicly raised unspoken words/phrases such as:

- “racism”
- “our local attitudes are conservative and exclusive”
- “making people feel unwelcome”
- “not supporting other people’s ideas”, and
- “being cautious and fearful”.

Their courage was applauded – not condemned. It generated fast, creative work to overcome these, previously unspoken but widely recognised, barriers to community success. A mixture of both workshop and questionnaire data yields a more comprehensive picture of the state of communities and their development.

Social polarisation was identified in every community in which the question of major barriers was raised. This confirms another recent study and indicates Australian culture has changed in the last 20 years. Economic and social changes may be affecting the culture in more fundamental ways than the demographic data indicates. If this is so, it increases the urgency for a strategy to increase the rate of success at managing change in rural and regional Australia.

# Strategies for increasing success at managing change

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The outlook for rural and regional Australia is that change will continue. The results of this study suggest that a strategic approach and a carefully designed program of further action research could significantly increase the chances of communities managing this change more successfully.

The program suggested below has four major components:

- a strategy to increase involvement, particularly youth involvement, in smaller communities
- a series of planning workshops, followed by
- a workshop in which participants design an effective organisation to implement their plans, and
- a cross-community workshop to train some rural and regional people in the best principles and practices of action research.

## At the broad strategic level

Under the *Results* section of this report, a strategy was looked at to simultaneously overcome the serious and deep-seated cultural barrier of people's reluctance to get involved in community activities and to increase the level of volunteering. The strategy is simple. It involves bringing existing community leaders and volunteers together to start creating more of the conditions that have been shown in this study to lead to a sense of community, positive feelings and success.

In contrast to the workshop design used in the consolidation phase of this study, future workshops should concentrate on action plans to achieve the community's most desirable future, as agreed by the participants.

Workshops in the current study were severely constrained by time and resources, and consequently the action planning was confined to overcoming the major barriers to success that were identified. Detailed preparation and planning would ensure future workshops avoid such limitations.

They would provide a better opportunity for communities to generate the energy and enthusiasm that would ensure community support and increase the likelihood of success. Given that the very brief workshops undertaken in this research produced markedly higher levels of positive feelings at the end than were present at the beginning, a more comprehensive design can be expected to show enhanced results.

The project would target those smaller communities that have lost population to the larger regional centres. They may be losing their youth but as the women in this study emphasised, these communities are 'brimming with potential'. Much of this potential resides within their youth. It could be realised if their motivation and energy could be mobilised.

## **At the more specific level of methodology**

Any future action research projects should use well established principles and practices. In particular:

- attention needs to be paid to ensuring the action research team and the community work as equals
- responsible self-managing groups, large and small, need to be used throughout and the process
- these groups need to be managed with the appropriate division of labour between participants and process managers
- the process managers need to have knowledge of, and experience in, the use of these principles, and
- both workshops and questionnaires should be used to provide a more comprehensive picture.

The community reference system should be used again because it draws people together across networks within the community, provides cross-fertilisation of ideas, ensures a non-biased sample and allows consideration of all issues raised from a more diverse set of perspectives. However, in this case, the system should be varied to ensure that about half the participants are young people. This will provide the opportunity for the young people to create and implement their own solutions, with others acting in a supportive role.

The other critical dimension of preparation and planning of such action research is that all participants must understand the purpose and process of the event they have been selected to attend. Ideally, as many as possible should be fully briefed about the design, concepts and principles built into the research, prior to attending.

All the factors built into this study need to be incorporated into the design of the workshop or event. They are built into methods such as the Search Conference from the very beginning of the process. The design could involve:

- considering the context within which the community operates, and its implications for the future of the community
- collectively compiling the community's history and learning from that about the uniqueness of its culture and the characteristics it needs to continue into the future
- sharing its success stories
- determining its most desirable future, within a realistic time-frame
- determining its major barriers to success and dealing with them, and
- doing action planning on priorities for achieving that most desirable future.

Such a workshop would generate high levels of excitement and energy to go forward. In the process of designing the organisation to effectively implement their plans, they learn why responsible groups work better than top-down hierarchical organisations, and the effects of both. This helps avoid problems or failures during implementation.

The second component (education) should follow shortly after the workshops to maintain momentum and capitalise on the energy generated.

## **Education for more widespread success**

Any effort to improve change management practices in rural and regional Australia needs to incorporate an educational component to ensure its sustainability. The capacity to share knowledge and innovation between communities needs to be developed in order to fully utilise community resources and reduce their dependence on others. This could be accomplished by each community selecting one or two of their interested participants to attend a week-long training workshop on the methods involved and the concepts and principles underlying effective change management.

Increasing communities' knowledge and capacity would increase the probability of successful outcomes from plans and actions initiated in the original workshops – both within the workshop communities and others. Bringing people together from diverse communities for this training workshop would also have the effect of building a supportive network across the country. Participants would realise that they were all in it together, aiming to achieve the same sorts of goals.

The training workshop would deal with real life examples introduced by the participants. It would provide for mutual learning as people from various communities worked together, sharing experiences and ideas.

# Conclusions

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Rapid global and national economic and social change has profoundly affected rural and regional Australia. Previous studies have shown that many communities are not coping very well with the changes and the resulting uncertainty. However, some are.

The seven communities in this study were independently assessed as having been relatively successful at managing this change. A program of action research was conducted in these seven communities, with women who were selected by the communities themselves. This research comprised two phases – an initial exploratory phase and a subsequent consolidation phase.

The **major finding** of this study is that the way the women feel about their communities:

- makes the largest direct contribution to ratings of success at managing change; and
- is the link between the factors involved in being successful and success itself.

While feelings have been implicated as important factors in other studies, this study appears to be the first to identify them as the single most important success factor in managing change. This is demonstrated by the following findings:

- positive feelings make the largest contribution to high ratings of success
- negative feelings make the largest contribution to low ratings of success
- trust was the only factor that made an additional contribution to success, and
- the reluctance to get involved was the only factor that made an additional contribution to a lack of success.

This action research project has provided further support for previous findings. The most powerful contributors to *positive feelings* were:

- volunteering
- developing a sense of belonging
- caring for and cultivating growth
- 'doing good' for all people
- beauty and the importance of leading full lives in a healthy environment
- working through responsible groups
- trust among community groups and residents and creating an environment that encourages this trust
- strong community leaders, and
- creativity.

This study has added to our knowledge about barriers to success. The most powerful barriers identified were:

- a reluctance to get involved,
- economic rationalism at the local level, and
- superficiality – losing direction and the desire for a rich, full life.

The workshop data also showed widespread evidence of social polarisation and social engineering. A question must remain as to whether there really are more barriers to success in Australia than there were twenty years ago. This needs further research.

Greater success at managing change in rural and regional Australia can be achieved by simultaneously reducing the reluctance of residents to become involved in community activities and increasing the rate of volunteering. This can be achieved by bringing community leaders, including a high proportion of young leaders, together to create the conditions that make people feel more positive about their communities.

This strategy translates into a further program of action research targeting smaller communities that are at risk of becoming demoralised as structural and demographic changes continue. It involves a series of carefully planned, designed and managed workshops using all the factors for success, incorporated into the structure and process of the workshops.

These workshops would provide opportunities for the creative planning and implementation of a range of projects aimed at increasing the viability of, and quality of life in, the communities. The projects would raise the levels of excitement and energy and generate more success stories.

Combining these workshops with a training workshop for members selected from a cross-section of these communities would raise the probability that further success at managing change across rural and regional Australia would become self-sustaining.

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