Navigating the challenges of innovative regional governance: a tale of two towns

Lain Dare

Leonie Pearson, Mark Evans

Institute for Governance and Policy Analysis, University of Canberra

11th ACCARNSI, Canberra, February 2016
Objectives

To highlight the realities of multiple challenges influencing sustainable regional development:

• Development approaches in action
  – economic & ‘social’ development

• Critical dilemmas inhibiting sustainable development

• Suggestions for improved governance
The study

Qualitative research
• Semi-structure interviews
  (180+ participants)
• 8 Future Forums
  (70+ participants)
• Areas of interest:
  – Community networks & drivers
  – Measures of community progress
  – Future aspirations for community
  – Barriers & opportunities
Challenges:
- Changing demographics
- Youth unemployment
- Economic development
  - Impacts of climate (drought, floods)
  - Lack of value adding
  - Irrigation dependent
  - Low infrastructure
  - Lack of ‘skilled’ workforce
- Implications of policy reform
- Low political influence (safe seat)

Opportunities:
- Innovative people
- Natural environment
  - Tourism potential
- Economic diversity
- Good community services and facilities
SEE Renmark 2024

• Strategic plan for effective use of structural adjustment funds:
  1. Irrigation modernisation
  2. Rehabilitation of Ral Ral floodplain
  3. Renmark town centre revitalisation
  4. Great River Walks

Economic development & diversity (tourism), better utilisation of natural environment

Environmental degradation, community involvement

Low infrastructure, economic development (tourism), community development (cohesion/pride)

Low infrastructure, economic/water efficiency, town planning (housing expansion)
Renmark - Economic development

Low capacity – human (skills) and financial capital due to cumulative impacts of drought, policy, demographic changes....

Innovation – human capital

Social cohesion – segmented community

Social leadership – local, strong and respected

Economic development – historically and culturally agricultural based

Role of ‘government’ – [shallow] localism approach due to prevailing institutions
Why was this plan developed this way?

• Prevailing institutions ....
  “[locals] more suitable than having bureaucrats coming in and telling us what to do... We are the people on the ground. We know what the community needs”

• No community involvement from the beginning?
  Good leadership is available within community, yet “through the basin plan they are jack of it”
Robinvale – Victoria

Challenges:
• Changing demographics
  – Migrant workers
• Economic development
  – lack of value adding
• Low community infrastructure & services
  – Housing
  – Childcare
  – Education
• Social cohesion
• Leadership
• Poor relationship with local government
• Poor ‘Image’

Opportunities:
• Innovative people
• Economic diversity
• Natural assets
• Strong local leadership
Robinvale - Community development

Robinvale District Health Service

• Leadership void – relative absence of local government
• Flexible funding arrangements due to being a ‘Multipurpose Service’ (unusual)
• Hospital runs:
  • Tourism centre
  • After school/holiday care programs
  • Early childhood programs
  • Various community services/programs (e.g. youth development, parenting programs, language programs)
• Auspices various funds for other organisations
Why this development approach?

- Segmentation of community

- Poor trust in local government
  “We hate Swan Hill like the blazers ... “They are a mob of hyenas down there.”

- Strong local leadership
  “We have the people and the guts to do it ... When we look like falling down, we stand up again”

“Doesn’t have infrastructure, but innovative thinking and open to partnerships”
## Barriers & Enablers for Effective Governance within Regional Australia

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Enablers</th>
<th>Barriers</th>
<th>Solutions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Local belief and commitment to community and its future</td>
<td>Issues with social cohesion (multiple ‘discrete’ communities)</td>
<td>Improve acknowledgement of multiple communities and representation of interests in development decision-making processes</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership capacity (restricted)</td>
<td>Leadership Capacity (broad)</td>
<td>Provide support and resources for leaders, including mentoring for emerging leaders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘Space’ within governance framework</td>
<td>Support within governance framework</td>
<td>Effective subsidiarity of decision-making and policy implementation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Resources (natural)</td>
<td>Resources (human and financial capital)</td>
<td>Leverage resources through development of partnerships</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy reform (has provided opportunities and access to resources)</td>
<td>Policy reform (has continued uncertainty)</td>
<td>Improved communication, evaluation and development of policy reform programs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all of our research participants for sharing their experiences and insights with us.

This Murray-Darling Basin futures research is supported through the Australian Government’s Collaborative Research Networks (CRN) Program.