Fostering Resilience

Empowering rural communities in the face of hardship

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Statistics for rural and remote communities in Australia make for grim reading. The people in these communities experience relatively high unemployment, low household incomes, inadequate public transport, scarce services and an ageing population (Catholic Welfare Australia 2006). Coming on top of these difficulties has been the current Australian drought, which has been unprecedented in terms of its severity, geographic spread and duration, with some areas declared to be in '… exceptional circumstances for 13 of the past 16 years' (Productivity Commission, Australia 2008). The 'natural cause' of this economic loss has left communities struggling, as they attempt to respond to a situation that is largely beyond their control. In many cases this has led to a decline in rural community populations, with many members seeking better incomes and circumstances elsewhere (Country Matters 2008).

Recently, the Australian government established a Drought Policy Review Expert Social Panel to examine the social impact of drought on rural communities. During 2008, the panel held 25 public meetings with over 1000 people in order to gain feedback on the challenges facing these communities and, most importantly, to gather information to develop guidelines for the future. Among the multiple recommendations, the panel noted, 'To effectively prepare communities for the social impacts of future dryness, governments must ensure [that] support of community development initiatives reinforce social changes that will endure' (DPRESP 2008, p. 26). While outlining many positive interventions and responses to these communities, the panel also highlighted that 'There are a range of individuals and non-government welfare or church-based groups that are almost competing with each other to deliver packages of food, clothing or toiletries and to hold community socialising events' (p. 26). Further to this, 'A number of people informed the panel that, in their view, many of these groups may have lost sight of their client group' (p. 26).

In this article we report on findings generated from community meetings held as part of the community resilience building approach used by the North East Riverina Rural

Counselling Service (NERRCS). While it is not unusual to capture information about the impact of climate on rural areas from public meetings or forums (such as the Expert Social Panel, 2008), this study uniquely focused on capturing community responses about what actions and goals they would propose, in order to build and strengthen their communities for the future. Contrary to being 'out of touch' and 'losing sight of their client group', the NERRCS approach is specifically designed to focus and empower small rural communities, families and individuals to self-manage the ongoing impact of adverse climate changes. The project was funded by the Australian Government Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA), and focused on eight small communities in the south-east of New South Wales, Australia. This article details the key outcomes from the community meetings held in these regional areas, plus provides a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the research. It was considered that the core themes (from community responses) would provide important information and perhaps direction to other communities, policy makers and researchers seeking to encourage social groups struggling to build their resilience.

THE NERRCS APPROACH

The broad aim of the NERRCS approach was to support and build capacity in rural communities so that they could effectively manage change and thrive. The approach was initially developed from a community forum with practical input from a regional reference group and rural health academics from the Centre for Inland Health, Charles Sturt University, Wagga, New South Wales, and Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria. Central to the approach was increasing community access to and use of services offered by government and other agencies. It was recognised that rural people preferred to create their own destiny rather than have programs imposed on them. The project was designed, therefore, to empower small communities, with the secondary benefit of avoiding dependency. Community members would be invited to work together and plan community capacity building measures that would help them cope with the effects of drought. A series of community meetings were central to the NERRCS strategy.

The approach is strengths based, focusing on community assets and strengths rather than deficiencies and weaknesses in accordance with the principles of asset-based community development (Scales & Streeter 2004). The NERRCS approach is also informed by the model of neighbourhood resilience described by Mowbray and colleagues (2007), and employs principles that underpin family and community centred practices (Dempsey & Keen 2008; Dunst, Trivette & Hamby 2007), which recognise that communities are unique, know the needs of their members best and are most able to support themselves. The concept of resilience has provided a valuable theoretical foundation on which to build the resulting approach to facilitating positive community responses to hardship.

Definitions of resilience have included successful adaptation to stressful circumstances (Werner & Smith 1982), the ability of individuals at high risk to prosper (Rutter 1987) and 'bungy jumping through life' (Fuller, McGraw & Goodyear 1999, p. 159). Resilience involves such things as inner strengths like optimism, self-esteem and adaptive coping techniques (Grotberg 1995), and relational strengths characterised by having and maintaining quality supports and connections (Grotberg 1995). Relational resilience involves quality family connections (Resnick, Harris & Blum 1993), availability of support (Cohen & Wills 1985) and positive educational institutions and experiences (Fuller et al. 1999; Resnick, Harris & Blum 1993). Luthar (2006, p. 780), a distinguished expert in the field, sums up five decades of research into resilience by saying that 'Resilience rests, fundamentally, on relationships … strong supportive relationships are critical for achieving and sustaining resilient adaptation'.

While there has been considerably less research into community resilience, per se, than into individual resilience, Landau and Saul (2004) identify four themes important to community resilience in response to natural disasters and traumas. They include community and social connectedness; collective communication regarding the trauma; 'getting back on the horse [by] reestablishing the rhythms and routines of life'; and having a positive vision of the future or renewed hope. Mowbray and colleagues (2007) highlight connectedness to others through social assets, such as schools and sporting clubs in urban neighbourhoods, as being very important for community resilience. Being strengths focused is also an underlying ideal of the resilience concept. Landau (2007, p. 351) suggests that '… individuals, families, and communities are inherently competent and resilient, and that with appropriate support and encouragement, they can access individual and collective strengths that will allow them to transcend their loss'. This is the underlying premise of the NERRCS approach and is inherent within its strategic response to the small rural communities it serves.

In summary, it appears critical that interventions for Australian rural communities, which face perhaps the most difficult period in their history, must focus on empowerment from within rather than answers imposed from without. It also appears theoretically and anecdotally important that these solutions be socially proficient – that is, they build upon the social connections and resources already present in these communities to further develop their social resources.

METHOD

Context

The study was conducted in eight small rural communities, ranging in population size from approximately 150 to 8000. These communities are all located within the northern Riverina region of New South Wales, Australia, in an area spreading 50–220

km north and west of Wagga Wagga. This is part of the service delivery region of NERRCS. Wagga Wagga is a large regional centre (population just under 60 000), located 450 km south-west of Sydney. ARIA+ index scores for the participating communities ranged between 2.40 and 10.53, meaning these communities were categorised as 'outer regional' to 'remote' (Australian Institute of Health & Welfare 2004).

Participants

Participants were 97 consenting members from the eight communities who, following open invitations to all community members, attended two meetings in their community organised by NERRCS. On this basis, it is unlikely that the participants were representative of all community members, but it is likely that they reasonably represented those community members most likely to participate in action to strengthen their communities, as attested by their attendance at the meetings. All participants were informed of the nature and purpose of this study, which formed part of the evaluation of the NERRCS program and meetings. All volunteered to participate on the understanding that the data required for the study would be gathered during the meeting proceedings, and that the anonymity of individuals would be protected. Participants were informed through extensive local advertising, including posters, newsletters and word of mouth, that the gatherings aimed to enlist local input to community planning and action that would strengthen the community.

Ethics

The study protocol was approved by the Charles Sturt University Ethics in Human Research Committee (Protocol 2008/133). Given the positive (strengths) focus of the approach and the voluntary nature of participation there was minimal risk to participants. However, we offered support service contact to participants and any description of participants ensured that they were not identifiable by their position in their communities. To take part in the community meetings, or focus groups, participants signed consent forms that were stored separately from all other material associated with the study, such as recordings, memo notes and transcripts. Any identifying information emerging at any time was removed from the data sets. The study did not, as far as we are aware, impinge on culturally sensitive issues or involve culturally and linguistically diverse participants or persons with mental illness. The ethical considerations of the research were consistent with those applying to many qualitative research projects, and included participant recruitment, informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity, protection from harm, and interpretation and ownership. These considerations were managed in accordance with the ethical guidelines identified by Charles Sturt University's Code of Conduct for Research.

Procedure

Participants attended an initial interactive public meeting in their community, akin to a focus group, followed by a second 'action plan' meeting 6–10 weeks later. Both meetings were facilitated by NERRCS. The initial meeting encouraged attendees to identify and prioritise their needs, identify the community assets available to respond to those needs and identify skills gaps and barriers that must be addressed. The second meeting encouraged participants to prepare action plans that would strengthen their community and address identified needs. In line with the earlier mentioned philosophy of NERRCS – communities are unique, know best the needs of their members and are most able to support themselves – the discussion at both meetings in each community was very much 'led' by the community and not the facilitators. The meetings were guided by the following four key research questions (posed to each community):

—What are some of the issues/things that you are noticing here that you feel are a result of the drought?
—What does your community need to do if it is to become stronger?
—To implement an action plan to strengthen your community, what training and/or other supports do you need?
—What actions and future goals should your community undertake to become stronger?

Data Collection

Data was collected in two ways, with consent of all participants. First, large write-up sheets ('butchers paper') were employed to record, in writing that could be viewed by all participants, key points from the discussion. Second, the proceedings were audio recorded in order to capture the detail of the discussions.

Data Analysis

Following the meetings, both sources of data were then summarised for each community in the form of a brief report (6–8 pages), including action plans (see examples in Appendix 1). All documents were returned to the communities for participant checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), in order to elicit feedback on any inaccuracies and required amendments. Key themes from the eight individual community reports were then independently identified by two authors for each of the four questions. These authors then pooled shared theme categories, noting differences but reaching an overall consensus regarding central themes.

RESULTS

Tables 1 to 4 outline the key responses to each of the four research questions, with communities listed as 'A' through to 'H'. To the first question regarding the impact of the drought, Table 1 presents six key themes: finances, transport, stress and health, social disintegration, young people and community events (in this case, generally a positive outcome associated with events that brought the community together).

There were three subthemes within the 'financial impact of the drought' category: a general expression of having less money ('no money in your pocket'); the subsequent need for people to find off-farm jobs to supplement income; and the cost of transport. This issue of cost of transport (particularly in relation to higher fuel costs) was also considered important in relation to reducing social activity. Participants across a number of communities thought that the cost of transport meant that fewer people joined in sporting or other social activities, or volunteered for community activities.

Transport was also specifically mentioned in relation to accessing services such as health and education, but was also seen as a broader reflection of the 'Tyranny of Distance' suffered by rural communities. In distilling the comments, it appeared that transport was a 'rural issue', irrespective of the drought. However, the effect of the drought in reducing income and, in recent times, the increasing cost of fuel meant there was essentially a double negative impact on the ability to fund travel costs.

Table 1: 'What are some of the issues/things that you are noticing here that you feel are a result of the drought?'

Town	Financial impact of drought			Transport	Stress and health	Social disintegration	Young people	Community events (positive)
	General	Off-farm work	Fuel costs – social contact					
A	No money to spend. Affecting business and businesses closing.	Farmers working 'off farm' for income.	Really hard to find money to do things.			Going outside of town, 'living away from home base'. Volunteers are burning out, giving up commitments.	Numbers of children dropping (no farming children) – have been decreasing since 1980s. Fewer activities locally for children – now going to bigger centres.	One particular annual major event of this community is good for the town. Community drought gatherings and witches night have been good.
B	Unemployment – rural and regional. Fifty per cent less income in Shire since 2001. Slower retail economy.		Fewer dollars in community – less joining in things like sport etc.		Strain on existing facilities; mental, physical, emotional. Children impacted (they know what is going on and are feeling the strain). Negativity, frustration.	Social interaction decreasing.	Kids not coming to town. Declining student numbers (TAFE), especially in rural courses.	
C	Financial impacts on individuals, families, business and the community.				Health issues, including access to doctors (depression, hidden feelings).	Volunteers burning out. Friendly town. Incoming people are welcomed +/–	People leaving the community, particularly young people. School numbers are fine.	Strong sporting ties.

Town	Financial impact of drought			Transport	Stress and health	Social disintegration	Young people	Community events (positive)
	General	Off-farm work	Fuel costs – social contact					
D	Prolonged nature of drought.		Lack of income and disposable cash for individuals and families within the community.		Concern and worry in terms of future weather.	'Town name is changing'. New people moving to the community especially from 'cities'. They have different ways of living and different expectations.	Perception by parents that children will be 'turned off' pursuing a career in agriculture/ farming. Community is ageing – fewer children and families – not attracting young families.	
E	People looking for alternative employment – off farm.	Requirement to travel away for training and stay away from home with low wages.	Social aspect disappeared as a result of financial restrictions. Increased fuel costs having a real impact – potential to increase isolation.	Very limited services and having to travel for everything – health, education etc. – placing extra financial burden. Some services not available in local community, so need to travel to Wagga Wagga.		People leaving the community. Social aspect disappeared as a result of decreased numbers of residents. Families separated as a result of off-farm work – dividing families and increasing pressures in families.	Children noticing and missing the social side of the community. Sporting clubs folding.	Community connection lost in recent years, e.g. closure of Golf Club and Tennis Club.
F	Financial impacts.		Isolation due to cost of fuel: impact on health. Difficulties with IPTAS (Isolated patient transport assistance scheme). Guilt of parents. Extra pressure on service providers.		Depression. Frustration – not being able to provide for family. Loss of control. Losing confidence in the future. Lack of motivation to plan/decide.	Exodus from rural areas. Family break-down (com-munication breakdown). Community resilience in evidence. Volunteers de-creased: num-bers, ability, financial and psychological, availability, work demands, tougher existence.		Community teamwork to the fore. Opportunit-ies to teach kids about resilience, teamwork.
G	Lack of on-farm jobs. Lack of income – small businesses struggling.	Having to get other jobs.		Community transport needs (no transportation to bigger centres). 'Tyranny of distance'; tradespeople not wanting to come out.	Lack of motivation. Depression (individual) – concern children are depressed as well.		Losing young people. Harder for young families to get started.	

Town	Financial impact of drought			Transport	Stress and health	Social disintegration	Young people	Community events (positive)
	General	Off-farm work	Fuel costs – social contact					
H	No money in your pocket.	More women working off farm – childcare issues. Fuel is dear here – people have to travel long distances.	Less people with time and money to volunteer, but more work to do.		More depression. Feelings hidden – failure? Especially the men. Middle generation suffering – not as much experience of drought. Stigma attached to poor mental health.	People leaving farms/towns. People helping one another out – coming together more.		

Table 2 highlights some typical statements from across the community groups in response to the second research question identifying what communities need to do to become stronger. The central theme that emerged was the desire for more social or recreational activities. This was notable, as almost all of the groups saw this as a key way to bring people from the community together. The second theme was the need to strengthen families, with a particular focus on young people — this included more social activities and the general perceived need to 'strengthen families to support kids'. There was some overlap of this category with the social/recreational category and also with the third category, which was to provide support/empathy to and between community members. Together, these three categories constitute a shared theme of developing community connectedness and the social assets of the community.

Table 2: What does your community need to do if it is to become stronger?

Town	Social/ recreational	Family/ youth	Support/ empathy	Organisational/ visual/practical	Training
A	More social events.	More for the youth and families.		Town needs to look better.	
B	Maintain contact.		Understanding and listening.		Education, business development.
C	Hobby groups/clubs.		Help each other.		TAFE outreach courses/ computers.
D	Have regular organised gatherings. Socialise more.		Community support.	Work together as a group.	
E	Social gatherings.		Promote increased community connectedness.	Working bees to clean up church yards etc.	Provide resources to start projects.
F	More social events. Involve farm and town people together if possible.	Strengthen families to support kids.	Encourage communication and support between community members.	Funding and town improvement.	
G	Hobbies, sports etc.	Youth — social opportunities.	Be more aware of others' feelings.	Clean up after ourselves.	

The final two theme categories in participant responses were focused on such things as improving the look and function of the town (such as organisational/visual/ practical), and meeting the training needs of the community. Responses to Question 3 build upon this training need (see Table 3).

Town	Submission/ grant writing	Short courses	Action planning	Enlist outside support	Other
A				Get shire assistance.	Nothing needed – action being taken within town resources.
B	How to write funding submissions and access grants.		Support to write action plan.	Independent facilitator for future meetings (NERCCS).	Develop interagency collaboration.
C				Get outside support from local shire, youth work, NERCCS, Lions, Rotary.	
D	Submission/grant writing.	How to run more effective meetings and events.	How to plan.		Basic corporate governance.
E				Get funding from DPI and/or catchment management authority.	
F	Submission/grant writing.	Mental health and wellbeing. First aid update. Resumé writing.		Independent facilitator for planned meeting (NERCCS). Draw on outsiders for instrumental actions/ support.	
G				Independent facilitator for community meeting required.	

Table 3: To implement an action plan to strengthen your community, what training and/or other supports do you need?

The central training needs identified by participants were in submission and grant writing, short courses in such things as mental health and first aid updates, resumé writing and support on how to plan and undertake action planning. With the exception of one community, there was also an identified need to enlist outside support. In addition, almost half of the communities identified that an outside independent facilitator was important for planning and community meetings.

Further to this, and not shown in Table 3, participants also considered it important to have a local organiser who was readily accessible, knew 'what the community was already doing', and could ensure that the timing of such things as training was considerate of other work commitments. There was also interest in sharing community ideas with others.

The two most commonly articulated goals, each proposed by six communities, were centred on increasing social connectedness and being or becoming more positive in focus (see Table 4). Social connectedness focused upon bringing people together generally but also on getting the community working together and having fun. Being positive focused on developing a team spirit to build belonging and to overcome apathy. The remaining goals centred on providing support to others, particularly youth, welcoming visitors, improving the skills of community members and beautifying the town.

Based on these goals, each community then proceeded to develop a detailed action plan to address their goals. It is not possible, within the confines of this paper, to describe all of the actions proposed but examples are provided in Appendix 1 and illustrate the sorts of detailed and concrete planning that participants undertook for their communities.

Town	Social connectedness	Be/come positive	Provide support	Visitors	Improve skills	Improve town
A	Bring people together.		Support our youth.	Welcome our visitors.		Beautify our town.
B	Working community.	Overcome apathy to empathy. Interested community.				
C		Seek opportunity and run with it.	Support our community.	Increase visitors to town.		
D	Social connectedness.	Team spirit.	Mutual support.			
E	Bring people together.	Build a sense of belonging.			Skills for individuals. Skills for community.	
F	Bring people together, increase opportunity and diversity.	Create positive energy with positive communication.	Encourage and support youth.			
G		Create positive energy. Overcome apathy.			Skills training.	
H	Family fun day.					

Table 4: What actions and future goals should your community undertake to become stronger?

DISCUSSION

Many communities in this study highlighted the stress and strain associated with the drought and the resultant mental health problems. This is consistent with previous research (for example, Alston & Kent 2004; DPRESP 2008). The theme of halting disintegration and building social cohesion was a key need and action plan. This theme was also important for young people. While previous literature has shown how the drift of families away from rural communities impacts on young people's further education and schooling (Alston & Kent 2006; DPRESP 2008), the current finding illustrates that rural communities are also concerned about the socially isolating nature of drought on young people.

An important finding from this study was the enthusiasm and empowerment that the NERRCS approach facilitated in the participating communities. The Appendix illustrates communities determining and taking action to meet their own identified needs, with multiple community members responding with action.

Landau and Saul (2004, p. 9) suggested, following the 9/11 tragedy, that communities in New York needed the opportunity '… to be able to retain or regain connection to their families and natural support systems'. It appears that communities in the rural Australian context have similar needs. The NERRCS approach brought each participating community together and focused them on their strengths and natural support systems, via social activities.

However, unlike 9/11, the Australian drought experience is now not considered to be a defining event, but rather a normal part of Australian agriculture (DPRESP 2008). This definitional reorientation of drought prompts a need to examine how external agencies should respond to these communities. The NERRCS community empowerment approach, as demonstrated by the current findings, provides a model of how governments (and

non-government agencies) can respond to the recent Expert Social Panel suggestion that, 'Governments must be more effective in encouraging people in rural communities to self-identify their health needs and be able to seek appropriate support at an early stage' (DPRESP 2008, p. 8). Instead of external agencies imposing themselves on communities (DPRESP 2008), we suggest a resilience model of community engagement that:

—focuses communities upon their strengths and natural support mechanisms
—inherently values the communities' strengths and ability to respond
—builds upon the communities' self-identified needs, activities and assets.

Such outcomes are clearly demonstrated by many of the community responses highlighted in Table 2. In responding to the question 'What does your community need to do if it is to become stronger', the communities highlighted four key strengths that could be built upon. Notably, only one factor (training) required outside support. While not suggesting that outside assistance should not be offered, this finding highlights that if given the opportunity (for example, via the NERRCS approach) communities will focus upon building and enhancing their own strengths and resources. We suggest that employing this approach is likely to lead to a more efficient, focused and effective use of external resources, one which is directed by communities.

The NERRCS approach could also be extended further. First, it could consider what mechanisms could be put in place to sustain engagement, empowerment and development of these communities. While some of the current NERRCS communities did not need further encouragement to focus and plan for the future, other communities appeared to need ongoing facilitation to nurture empowerment. A second issue is how to encourage early identification of issues, problems and solutions, using the NERRCS approach, in a continuous fashion. One mechanism might be for drought workers or counsellors to regularly facilitate such meetings with the communities they serve — akin to a town reference group that is attuned to recognising community needs and directing actions and utilising resources. We recommend that agencies, as a first step, engage with groups of individuals who are broadly representative of their community. Engagement with communities should be undertaken with a strength and resilience focus and attitude. This would ensure that individuals and organisations intending to serve communities do not 'lose sight of their client group'. It is particularly important to note that facilitators need to be independent of the communities, be strengths focused and be willing and able to facilitate community action and self-development.

There are several limitations to this research. First, the data collection relied upon groups of individuals who volunteered to attend a community meeting. While these meetings were open to

the public, the findings may have been affected by sampling bias and participants responding in a group setting. Second, while considerable effort was made to reduce any facilitator bias (that is, facilitator awareness of the issues, philosophy of NERRCS), small rural communities are not isolated from one another, and they may have communicated action aims or outcomes to each other independently of the NERRCS-organised meetings.

In conclusion, the current findings are important in confirming some of the key issues of stress, strain and financial hardship in rural communities dealing with prolonged drought. However, most importantly, the findings demonstrated that, though the communities recognise that this situation is contributing to some degree of social disintegration, there appears to be considerable hope that, by working together and utilising social agencies, communities can develop social connectedness, which can in turn make them more resilient. The NERRCS approach is an important model that drought workers and governments can use to encourage rural communities to self-identify their needs, strengths and assets; be empowered to take future action; and move forward in a coordinated fashion.

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APPENDIX 1

Examples of action planning and goal setting from Towns D and E (note that minimal editorial changes were made to these planning documents).

Town D

By consensus, the participants decided to focus on social connectedness (Goal 1) as it was felt that if Town D was a socially connected community this would foster mutual support (Goal 2) and team spirit (Goal 3).

Our goal

Organise a Community Christmas Celebration at the Recreation Ground.

—How: Find out who is interested – by newsletter, word of mouth, shop notice and personal contact. Enlist support.

—When: Sat 15th December at 5.30 pm (TBC), planning done by 1st week in December.

—Who: Seven people were named as volunteers (noted that all others who show interest were welcome – the more the better). One person was named to talk to all who come into the Store.

—Resources: $$$$ Budget $600: promotional flyer, inform and get permission from Recreation Ground and Show Society (Shire), get Public Liability Insurance – each of these activities were assigned

a volunteer responsible for taking action. Get people to help; need kids' amusement ideas.

A final note: By this point in the process facilitation was redundant, as the participants had taken control of both the process and the event. They then presented their morning's work to the Year 6 pupils , seeking their involvement and feedback. The group agreed to meet again at the Store on Monday next in order to continue planning.

Town E

Our goal

To bring people together, increase opportunity and diversity with the aim of creating a music group/club.

—How: Approach arts council, develop the story behind the idea, use churches and schools to promote, identify and seek expressions of interest, write a story for the newspaper and local news.

—When: Discuss potential at next interagency meeting May 20.

—Who: Five volunteers were identified, with some actions required, including talking to Arts council and approaching a neighbouring community who had a choir.

—Resources: Draw on local government area to promote and find a venue; the Arts Council and local newspaper to help in promotion.

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