

Write it up!

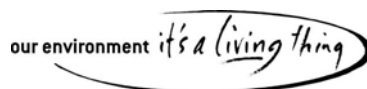
**Case studies of sustainability education projects
from around NSW**

Bringing Namoi rural communities together for capacity building and support

A unique community renewal initiative

This project is a unique capacity-building initiative developed in the North West Slopes and Plains Region of NSW to renew and support rural community life.

By Carolyn Bridge, Liverpool Plains Land Management, 2008.



Snapshot

Introduction

Maintaining strong community networks is vital for the future viability of rural communities. Years of drought and other economic and social pressures have taken a huge toll on many traditional rural community networks such as Village Hall Committees, Progress Associations, CWA branches, Rural Bush Fire Brigades and Landcare groups. These groups and other rural community networks have been the “backbone of the bush” and essential in combating social and economic stressors. Volunteer fatigue and aging communities exacerbated problems.

In the North West Slopes and Plains Region of NSW, spanning the local government areas of Tamworth, Gunnedah and Liverpool Plains, a special community capacity building initiative has been developed to address this problem.

Project funding

The major challenge was to devise a project which would address the identified issues and attract major funding from an appropriate funding organisation. This concept of providing social and community support and not just looking at natural resource management (NRM) and environmental outcomes, required a clever piece of lateral thinking from Management.

Liverpool Plains Land Management (LPLM) and Tamworth/Manilla Landcare Association (TMLA) collaborated in accessing project funding from the Stronger Families and Communities rounds of funding being delivered by the Federal Department of Families, Community Services, Housing and Indigenous Affairs (FaHCSIA).

Stakeholders

- Landholders and rural residents, particularly in the smaller villages and farming areas;
- The Executive Committees of both LPLM and TMLA;
- Community Groups – Landcare, Rural Bushfire Brigades, CWA branches;
- Liverpool Plains, Gunnedah and Tamworth regional councils;
- Other service providers, both NRM and Community Service or Welfare organisations, including Namoi CMA, DPI Drought Support Program and NSW Rural Mental Health;
- The media; and
- The funding body – FaHCSIA.

Key issues

- Overcoming public cynicism and apathy;
- Widespread social disconnectedness;
- The tyranny of distance – a widely spread and isolated targeted clientele;
- Getting locals together to talk about their common issues;
- Explaining the concept of capacity building and its effectiveness in addressing social disconnectedness; and
- Meeting the diverse needs of communities spread across three local government areas.

Project activities

A simple “Community assets, issues and strategies” identification session was held initially with most participating Landcare or local landholder groups. More often than not, isolation and lack of regular social activities was identified as an issue and the obvious solution was to hold a “Uniting the Community” gathering and conduct a community survey to ascertain interest in other activities. In most cases, these functions were organised by the community members themselves, with varying degrees of assistance from the Project Coordinator.

Other activities have included the planning and staging of “Healthy Farms, Healthy Farmers” forums, ‘Mental health’ and “Loss and grief” awareness evenings and environmental forums, regular attendance at various group meetings and the production of a regular newsletter for Tamworth Regional Landcare groups.

Project outcomes

The results have exceeded perhaps all expectations. The project began in July 2007 and since March 2008 has had a snowballing effect.

- More than a dozen Landcare Groups have been supported and a couple of CWA branches and other groups have also received assistance;
- Several isolated communities have been re-invigorated and taken greater ownership of local issues;
- Landcare has been revitalised in the Catchment;
- The Social, economic and environmental benefits of Landcare have been celebrated and showcased;
- There has been greater collaboration between NGOs and government agencies in delivering more client-focussed services;
- The TMLA has been restructured and is now in a strong position to represent Landcare regionally; and
- The holistic needs of landholders and rural residents have been recognised and given consideration, and mental health has been put on same agenda as farming practices and drought preparedness education.

Where to from here?

The project has achieved a great deal and there are tangible improvements for many community groups. A two-year project was insufficient to meet the demands of the whole targeted region. Rural Communities have become cynical about “wonderful one and two-year-projects” that achieve great things but disappear into the sunset! This project has proven to be a cost-effective and inclusive means of supporting rural community life.

An ongoing commitment is required from Government to ensure a minimum level of support is given to isolated rural communities in the future.

Bringing Namoi rural communities together for capacity building and support

This case study shows how a Natural Resource Management (NRM) organisation based in Gunnedah in northern New South Wales stepped out of its comfort zone to successfully plan and implement an effective Community Renewal Initiative.

“We should have been doing this five years ago” expressed a tearful young farmer’s wife and mother of three after a successful meeting to reform her very isolated community’s progress association.

It had taken seven months of meetings and many phone calls facilitated by Liverpool Plains Land Management (LPLM) Community Renewal Initiative Project Officer, Carolyn Bridge, but the small community wedged between the Upper Hunter and the Liverpool Plains was finally forming structures to ensure its continuing viability.

This scenario has been played over many times in slightly different localities over the past 18 months, since the introduction of a unique Community Capacity Building Project in rural communities in the Liverpool Plains, Gunnedah and Tamworth council areas.

With the success of the project now, one could be forgiven for saying that the project has been easy and has gone without hiccup. But that certainly has not been the case.

Key objectives

The project had three key objectives:

1. To strengthen the spirit and well being of local communities
2. To build capacity to better cope with drought
3. To educate landholders to better manage their land for production, environmental outcomes and restored profitability.

Getting started

Like all good ideas, this project started with discontent. A gathering of regional farmers in Gunnedah in 2006 expressed disappointment at the “decaying” state of their small rural communities and some villages. Volunteer fatigue was spoken about and “some sort of help was needed”.

The then chairman of LPLM, Peter Capp, and Executive Officer David Walker, set about sourcing funding for a project that would address the issues expressed at the farmers’ gathering. LPLM is a community-based landholder-driven NRM organisation in Gunnedah, in the Liverpool Plains Region of NSW.

For an NRM organisation to apply for funding from the Federal Department of Families, Housing, Community Service and Indigenous Affairs was an unusual move, but it worked. LPLM and TMLA were granted funding for the ‘Bringing Namoi Rural Communities Together for Capacity Building and Support Project’. Officially regarded as a ‘Drought Affected Communities - Local Answers Project’ it was funded under a special drought-affected communities round of the then Federal Government’s ‘Stronger Families and Communities’ Strategy.

Staffing the project

Hiring the right person to roll out the project across such a diverse area was the next challenge for LPLM and TMLA.

As one of the key targeted areas for the project was local Landcare groups, many of which were either defunct or languishing, getting the right candidate for the position was always going to be a challenge.

It has since been said that the interview panel “took a risk” on hiring Carolyn Bridge, possibly because of her lack of NRM experience, but the risk paid dividends. Coming from a welfare, journalism and communications background, rather than a Landcare Coordinators background, Carolyn Bridge brought in a different skill set to the position and perhaps opened up the project to other opportunities in the wider community.

Doing our homework

Both David Walker and Carolyn Bridge decided early on that the initial stages of the project would be spent on research, meetings and publicity and developing an effective project work plan.

It was realised that a somewhat suspicious and cynical rural population could easily be resistant to any “perception of a hard sell”. A low-key consultative approach was required if the project was going to achieve its objectives.

This gave the project more credibility once Carolyn Bridge was “out around the traps” rolling out the project in the smaller rural communities. She had the back-up of knowledge from published research on how best to engage with rural communities and how best to work with small groups and local residents.

Pivotal moments in the project

While it was never going to be a project that featured a “one size fits all” approach, there is a formula that has been successful in developing the capacity of community groups.

The project co-ordinator facilitates an initial meeting with five or six people from the community to identify community assets, issues of concern and possible strategies. From this, a larger local community group meets to expand the list and implement strategies. Those strategies more often than not included staging a ‘Uniting the Community’ function - sometimes a simple neighbourhood barbecue for 10 to 12 people, or a big gathering for 80 to 100.

It was the success of one such ‘Uniting the Community’ function at Warrah Creek Hall in March 2008, which perhaps became a major milestone for the project. News of that event “spread like wildfire” among the neighbouring smaller communities and other groups were keen to get a piece of the action. Since that moment, it has been more a case of reporting and publicising our successes than needing to promote the service to roll it out to the targeted communities.

Some of the more personal achievements of the project have been the phone calls from people asking for “mental health” assistance or referral and the many messages of thanks and congratulations.

Project challenges

Challenges to be overcome during the course of the project have included:

- Professional jealousy and lack of cooperation from other service providers;
- Scepticism from a jaded and somewhat neglected rural clientele;
- Meeting the needs of isolated and rural communities in three very diverse local government areas – Tamworth, Liverpool Plains and Gunnedah; and
- Time constraints and overwhelming demand for the Project's activities.

Project outcomes

Results have exceeded perhaps all expectations. The project began in July 2007 and since March 2008 has had a snowballing effect.

- More than a dozen Landcare Groups have been supported and a couple of CWA branches and other groups have also received assistance;
- Several isolated communities have been re-invigorated and taken greater ownership of local issues;
- Landcare has been revitalised in the Catchment;
- The Social, economic and environmental benefits of Landcare have been celebrated and showcased;
- There has been greater collaboration between NGOs and government agencies in delivering more client-focussed services;
- The TMLA has been restructured and is now in a strong position to represent Landcare regionally;
- The holistic needs of landholders and rural residents have been recognised and given consideration, and mental health has been put on same agenda as farming practices and drought preparedness education; and
- Other NRM organisations throughout the State have asked for assistance in running similar community engagement programs.

Why has the project succeeded?

- Communities have been given ownership of their issues;
- "Burnt Out Volunteers of many "failing" organisations have jumped at the opportunity to involve new people and new ideas;
- The project has been community driven rather than service-provider driven;
- A simple and highly effective (but time consuming) community consultation process was included;
- The project was delivered by an organisation already trusted by the targeted community;
- There was no "wasteful spending of government funding";
- The focus was on connecting and networking and delivering client-focussed outcomes;
- The project was truly an Outreach Service – providing services to landholders in their own local community; and
- The timing was right – many residents were looking for a greater sense of "connectedness" in their communities (the importance of being self-focussed was diminishing).

Icing on the cake for communities

Not only does this project provide ongoing education and support for rural communities, it also offers significant fundraising opportunities for the small community groups involved.

School Parent and Citizen (P&C) groups and Country Women's Association (CWA) branches have been given a chance to raise funds by catering for local project events. This lightens the burden from often financially struggling communities.

An average of \$500 per rural community has been invested directly and used for vital fundraising efforts. This has been an added bonus to the education and support already provided by the project.

Advice to others contemplating a similar project

- Know your Community and what it wants.
- Do your research and develop appropriate resources.
- Develop networks and be prepared to refer to other agencies.
- Be persistent (keep up the lines of communication – keep contacting community groups even if they are at first not responsive or don't understand the project).
- Publicise your milestones effectively.
- Set up processes for community conflict resolution.
- Identify the local barriers to community cohesiveness (sensitive local issues, political problems and personality conflicts) and professionally engage the community in addressing the issues.
- Be sensitive that it is a privilege to be welcomed in the small communities and service groups and always empower those groups to take ownership of their own issues.
- Be sensitive to the perception that government-funded projects are often regarded "as wasteful, duplicated and short-term". Having true understanding and empathy for the local community and the local issues, goes a long way to overcoming those hurdles.
- Realise that funding is not always the only answer – so much can be achieved with relatively little funding.

Where to from here

There are structures in place and lasting resources as a legacy of the project but it is felt that some form of ongoing tangible support is needed.

Government decision makers and funding bodies will be lobbied in an attempt to keep the Community Renewal Initiative going past the 2009 July closure date. Rural communities are cynical about "wonderful projects" which are provided and then taken away. This project works and there is widespread demand to keep it going.

For further information

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"Bringing Namoi Rural Communities Together for Capacity Building and Support"



Cattle Creek gathering



Bendemeer CWA catering for Healthy Farmers Day Bendemeer



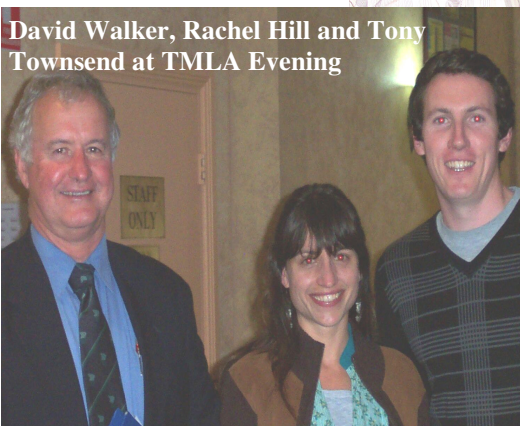
Lester McCormick and Carolyn Bridge at Healthy Farmers Day at Werris Creek



Carolyn Bridge and David Walker at Gunnedah Rotary BBQ



Local Farmers at Healthy Farms Day, Bendemeer



David Walker, Rachel Hill and Tony Townsend at TMLA Evening



Hutt Gully Landcare Group/Residents Gathering

