

WCRN Future Forums 2007 Report

WORKING COMMUNITIES REGIONAL NETWORK

FUTURE FORUMS REPORT 2007

The Working Communities vision is a network of vibrant, sustainable and prosperous rural communities developing and sharing innovative solutions to employment, enterprise and learning challenges in the bush. With support from the Rio Tinto WA Future Fund, the Working Communities Regional Network has operated for over three years and it is time to look to the future. An interactive Future Forum workshop series for participants and supporters of the Working Communities concept was held over two days in Kojonup in 2007. The aim of the series was to consider issues facing rural communities and plan for the future of the Working Communities Regional Network. The first day was held on Thursday April 26th 2007 and dealt with the challenges facing community groups in rural areas. The second was on May 24th 2007 where Working Communities participants and supporters planned activities and projects for the future. Our Futurist Ann Macbeth facilitated both days and the current communications plan was updated to include strategies and outcomes for the next three years.

Notes Session 1: Rural Community Trends Thursday April 26th 2007

Twenty people attended the first session Rural Community Issues on Thursday April 26th 2007 in Kojonup. The aim of this first session was to discuss some of the challenges facing rural community groups. Jill Mathwin, Terry (Tuck) Waldron and Senator Judith Adams represented the three levels of Government.

Futurist Ann MacBeth presented examples of how young people, via the internet, were now well connected globally and were starting to make things happen for the future. Ann urged us all to join the younger generation by listening to what they are achieving. Teenagers were communicating with their peers via the world wide web to make things happen with what was available. Many adults were unaware of the scale at which this was happening.

Ann then outlined three major trends that were driving change:

- Globalisation or a world view.
- Tribalism and a focus back to local issues.
- Technology driven change.

All of the trends were weakening the traditional role of government and the last two were strengthening the role of community. This was positive for the future of community groups but needed to be managed carefully to make sure that the views of community

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were represented and that consultation occurred before decisions were made. The important role volunteers play in community groups was recognised and those present concurred that it must be valued. However the issue of cost shifting also needed to be considered so that community groups were adequately resourced to deliver services and not expected to do everything voluntarily.

Climate Change and Peak Oil were also significant drivers of change that would impact on rural communities. Gill Sellar spoke about the potential of new technologies, especially the developments in Voice Over Internet Protocol (VOIP) enabling inexpensive, web collaboration connectivity between communities and other agencies. These tools such as *Discover-e*, *Skype*, *Elluminate*, *iChat* etc are becoming common place in business and community online engagement, with many mobile applications widely used by young people as preferred communication mediums as well as learning tools.

Passion and values were discussed as essential elements to implement change and individuals were particularly important in driving change in any community. It was important to recognise and work with key drivers in communities and not to get too bogged down in the organisational hierarchies that are necessary for accountability. Those present represented the key drivers in their communities and recognised this issue however accountability, especially for funding, was still a challenge that needed to be taken into consideration. Ann urged us all to remain focused on our passion and values to make things happen with what was available before looking at funding sources.

A range of types of community groups was discussed from informal gatherings and clubs to non-government service providers with paid staff. Most of those present represented non-government service organisations. The difficulty these groups had with government funding applications was again highlighted. Discussion followed on the role of our politicians. Judith and Tuck encouraged us all to have a say in order to influence policy as the reality was that accountability was a key consideration when providing public funds to any group. Community group members were urged to contact Judith and Tuck to make them aware of any concerns we had so they could take action on their behalf.

Trevor Chapman spoke about the role of Community Foundations as a way to future proof communities. The WA Community Foundation was working to help many rural communities set up Community Funds. Gill Sellar provided the example of how this was happening in Denmark where a local group had accessed funds from a variety of local businesses in order to have the critical mass required to leverage for a challenge grant from the Development Commission to start their community fund.

Vicki Webb spoke about the Kojonup Working partnership with the local high school and CWA ladies who collaborated to set up the CWA rooms as a learning area. This was now being used by the High School Senior Campus as well as an office for Kojonup Working projects and CWA meetings. A matrix was used to delegate responsibilities and resourcing equitably for the area so everyone knew what they were responsible for and how the costs were covered. Jody Thomas Smith spoke about the Senior Campus and

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how the students were achieving great results in a more adult learning environment separate from the school campus.

There was a sense that these initiatives needed to be promoted and that the important role that volunteers played in all the examples needed to be valued. It was good to have Senator Judith Adams and Terry Waldron present to encourage the collaborations to continue. Terry commented on the sense of vibrancy he now felt when visiting many rural communities in his area. Times had been tough in rural communities but there was a growing sense of optimism that initiatives were occurring that were making a difference. It was an ideal time to promote these initiatives and lobby for projects that were a win-win for everyone involved.

Vicki commented on the business community partnership that helped Kojonup Working establish after a series of future scenario workshops with Ann MacBeth in 2002. The strong partnership that had developed with the Rio Tinto WA Future Fund at the time, allowed a range of project areas to develop simultaneously and become self sustaining. The financial aspect of the partnership had now ended however the Rio Tinto Community Investment team were still available to offer advice and support into the future. Community Investment Advisor, Laurie Ball was addressing Session 2: Business Community Partnerships on Thursday May 28th. There would also be representatives from other Business Community partnerships available to join in the discussion.

The session ended with a request that the group be sent notes from the first session. An email list of attendees at both sessions was available and those present agreed that emails to participant no longer be sent as a blind carbon copy so that discussion could evolve.

Follow up: Role for Working Communities Regional Network

One of the outcomes for the sessions was to consider the continuation of the Working Communities Regional Network and its role in the future. This first session was encouraging and highlighted a communications role for the network which included lobbying and promoting activities. A draft Communications Plan that was prepared during 2006, with the support of the Rio Tinto WA Future Fund's communications consultant, would form the basis of the future plan. Using the new technologies for an interactive website/portal that included online meeting procedures could also be included in the plan.

Notes Session 2: Business with Community Thursday April 26th 2007

The aim of the two sessions in the Working Communities Future Forum Series was to discuss and decide if there was a role for the Working Communities Regional Network to play in the future and how those who attended the sessions could be involved.

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Twelve people attended the Second Session: Business with Community on Thursday May 24th 2007 in Kojonup. The group included community members, involved in Kojonup Working activities, together with regional and state based Non Government Organisations (NGOs) who partnered with business. Three of the organisations represented, including Kojonup Working, had been partners in the Rio Tinto WA Future Fund.

Vicki Webb welcomed everyone to Kojonup, honoured the traditional owners of the land, and outlined the aim of the day. The main reason for this session was to discuss how to include business in community activities. Laurie Ball from the Rio Tinto Community Investment Team was invited to present information from a business perspective.

At the first session: “Rural Community Trends”, participants were policy makers and members of community groups across the region. Partnering with government was discussed with the main issues identified as:

- Lack of resources and greater accountability
- Declining and aging population in rural areas.
- Everyone too busy to volunteer in the same way as in the past.
- The potential for e-communication.

Vicki Webb commented that it was a different group for this session “Business with Communities” with mainly non-government service providers and community members involved in Kojonup Working activities. Ann explained that this was a normal progression where successful projects like Kojonup Working eventually drew interest from outside the community base and this should be viewed positively as it meant others were taking notice and wanted to be involved. Vicki had noticed this transition occurring in many of the Working Communities groups. Ann Macbeth emphasised that any transition needed to be carefully managed and it was vitally important to recognise the contribution of community groups and to continue to work with the community to meet their needs.

Laurie Ball gave her presentation “Partnerships for Success” which looked at community partnerships and corporate social responsibility from a business perspective and used examples from the Rio Tinto experience. Laurie’s presentation covered the benefits of partnerships for both business and community and the importance Rio Tinto placed on helping communities. There were however challenges and Laurie outlined the strategies the Rio Tinto Community Investment Team used to meet the challenges. Barbara agreed to upload the presentation onto the website www.workingcommunities.com.au together with photos and notes from the session.

Trevor Chapman from the WA Community Foundation and Geoff Craggs from Conservation Volunteers confirmed the sincerity of Laurie’s presentation. They talked about their experiences as a Rio Tinto partner and how the partnership was very rewarding and a positive experience.

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Vicki Webb thanked Laurie for her presentation and talked about how the Working Communities had started out as a way of sharing with other rural communities what Kojonup Working was achieving in partnership with the Rio Tinto WA Future Fund. Vicki soon discovered that there were many community groups across WA that used a similar grass roots model. Rio Tinto agreed to continue to support the development of a Working Communities Regional Network (WCRN) during 2006 to enable the groups to share their experiences with each other and look to the future. There is now a growing band of government agency staff and large Non Government Organisations's interested in what key drivers in the WCRN are doing. This presented an opportunity to consider a more sustainable operating model for the future of the network. Laurie agreed to look at the plan and have input into a sustainable model for the future.

Geoff Craggs spoke about the work that Conservation Volunteers undertakes. Geoff was keen to be involved with community groups in the region. His group managed volunteers and equipment for conservation work and had volunteer training programmes that could be offered to any volunteer group. Geoff agreed to write a short article for the next WCRN e-newsletter outlining the services his group offered and provide links to volunteer training. Those present agreed to link Geoff with their local land care groups.

Vicki Williams from Communities for Children (C4C) in the Great Southern was also keen to form partnerships with community groups that were meeting the needs of children 0-4. She agreed to provide information to be distributed throughout the network and was particularly keen to let groups know about grants that were available to community groups.

Trevor Chapman from the WA Community Foundation (WACF) spoke about the challenge grants that were available through the Development Commission in this region to help establish local community funds. The idea of a Working Communities Regional Fund was discussed and Vicki Webb mentioned that the Kojonup Working committee had approved opening a donations account on behalf of WCRN. It would then be up to key drivers in the WCRN to decide if setting up a Community Fund was a role the network could play to help the small rural communities in the region. Trevor Chapman was available to help any community group move to the next step in the community fund process.

Discussion on how to develop business partnerships in rural areas followed and local musician Chris Edmondson talked about the difficulties of operating professionally from a rural base. Chris had developed a Creative Rural Communities Programme which was supported by the Kojonup Working committee however Chris was concerned that there may be a conflict of interest for his business as an entertainer if he coordinated the programme professionally. Ann urged Chris and other community people who were passionate about their businesses and helping community to continue to offer their services to community groups as it would increase the vibrancy and viability of rural communities when done in a professional way.

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Laurie agreed and urged us all to *“forget about the money and ask: is there still value in this partnership to the community? Often it was not about money but what skills could be offered, such as releasing employees to work in a community organisation regularly for a set time. It was important to think about what was important for the business to get out of a partnership as well as the community group.”*

Corporate giving had moved away from merely sponsorships that provided cash and received acknowledgement. Today partnerships and working with groups for the benefit of communities were gaining importance. There was a role for a Working Communities Regional Network to play in getting this message out. Ann suggested *“a good place to start would be for Kojonup Working to visit every business in their main street and ask: What can we do for you? followed by the question What can you do for us? If the answers fitted it was a good start to a partnership. It was also important to consider values to make sure they matched and Laurie urged us to have a package of contribution options available for businesses who did match.”*

Everyone agreed it was important to look after volunteers and ask them to join a team and be part of a project not just invite them to the AGM because you needed a treasurer. People would then see the passion of everyone involved in a team approach and be happy to give a set amount of time for a set task. It was also agreed that word of mouth marketing was particularly effective for this, especially with young people who prefer action volunteering (*but don't ask them to be on a committee*). Adopting all of these strategies would create a model for rural communities to adapt.

Bill Webb raised the issue of retaining autonomy and operating in silos and how it made partnerships difficult. Ann felt that diversity between communities was positive and there was a role for the Working Communities Regional Network to embrace diversity and promote the value of partnerships between different players as long as everyone shared similar values. Laurie felt it was important to concentrate on the partnership cycle and not limit projects to just one partner but involve multiple partners. Laurie urged us to stand back objectively and *“look at the strengths and weaknesses of the partners then crystalise the plans and remember to celebrate partnership successes.”*

There was potential to look at small to medium enterprises (SME's) as partners. Trevor Chapman spoke about research into SME's and giving that his group had commissioned which would soon be released into the public domain. Trevor agreed to make the research available to the WCRN as soon as it was released.

Brian Davis from the Kojonup District High School spoke about the partnership with Kojonup Working and the CWA which allowed a Senior Campus to be developed. The health of a community was strongly related to its youth and declining numbers in rural areas were making it difficult for schools to survive. Brian talked about the difficulty the Kojonup school was having in attracting community members into the school building *“because of past experiences.”* Ann Macbeth commented on the important role

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community partnerships had in the success of the Senior Campus away from the school grounds. Ann urged Brian to meet with Leith Johnston who was the local Coop manager and Chairman of Kojonup Working to find out how local businesses could be involved in the outreach learning programme. Leith, Brian and Vicki agreed to meet to consider how to lift the profile of the school and build closer links with local businesses.

Ann mentioned the opportunities for sole traders to form collaborative partnerships with each other and community. Another role for the Working Communities Regional Network would be to help these business operators to bridge the gap between personal gain and community work particularly in the arts.

Leith Johnston saw the potential to develop partnerships with individuals and attract professionals into the region. Leith commented that finding work for both partners was extremely important if couples were to live in regional areas. How do we attract couples when one partner has difficulty in finding fulfilling work to develop their professional skills? *"Kojonup is more than an agricultural community now and we have good access to technology so why not use it. We should also look for opportunities to develop professionally."* Vicki had written a plan for Kojonup Working to develop local enterprises which was not resourced and therefore yet to be actioned. Vicki and Ann would look at the plan and revise it to take into account outcomes from this session then discuss with Leith how to progress it. The Working Communities Regional Network could provide a valuable contact point for new professionals at a regional level.

The discussion over the past two sessions has reinforced the need for the Working Communities Regional Network to continue both from the community perspective and also from a professional viewpoint. Laurie asked Vicki to send through a list of all the communities that were represented on the network. There was other statistical information such as how many small businesses and sole traders were represented.

Vicki spoke about the Communications Plan which was prepared with the help of Rio Tinto's communications consultant in 2006 and agreed to update it with suggestions from the two sessions. It would be distributed to those attending the sessions for comment and become the WCRN plan for the future.

Prepared by:
Vicki Webb

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