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**ACHIEVING GENUINE
BROAD-BASED COMMUNITY
INVOLVEMENT IN THE
REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT
PROCESS**

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Introduction

This article explores a range of practical study design considerations that need to be addressed if bottom-up input is to be effectively engaged in the regional development planning process. The recently completed Central Queensland Regional Economic Development Strategy Inception Study (CQ RED STUDY) is used to illustrate how several commonly used information gathering and marshalling instruments can be combined to engage and maintain broad-based community participation throughout the duration of a study covering several sub-regions exhibiting significant geographic and economic differences.

The challenge for a study team embarking on a major regional development strategy study is to ensure that the entire spectrum of community interests, not just recognised key players, are drawn into the planning process as voluntary contributors. It is important that community involvement is perceived to be *balanced* spatially as well as *balanced* between interest groups who may put forward conflicting views on specific issues. In addition *genuine* community involvement is desirable as distinct from the contrived, peripheral or pseudo involvement that characterised many (but not all) of the participatory planning studies of the 1960s and 1970s. However, the constraints imposed by study budgets and time-frames can detract from the quality of community involvement given that the more comprehensive and deeper the consultation, the more expensive and time-consuming it becomes.

**CQ RED Study: Original Consultation
Agenda**

The Terms of Reference of the CQ RED Study stressed the need "to ensure that effective consultation with the regional community was

The 1993 National Conference of the Australian and New Zealand Regional Science Association will be held in Armidale, NSW on the 6th to 8th. December inclusive. It is not too late to enrol.

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instigated and was maintained throughout the Study" (p.19). This could be interpreted as being a tall order given a study budget of only \$65,000, a nine month time-frame and a study target area of 564,539 square kilometres which is approximately one third of the total area of Queensland. This vast area, with a population of 298,732 at the 1991 Census, contains thirty-two Local Government Authorities (LGAs) which have voluntarily aligned into five sub-regions or economic zones, each with its own Regional Development Organisation (RDO).

The Regional Development Managers (RDMs) of these five RDOs agreed to becoming the Consultative Committee through which effective two-way communication was maintained between the Study Team and the five RDMs who in turn kept the management of their respective RDOs informed and maintained meaningful two-way information flows between their private and public sector members and the Study Team.

The challenge ... is to ensure that the entire spectrum of community interests, not just recognised key players, are drawn into the planning process as voluntary contributors.

The original study design provided for primary community input to be provided through a *Needs and Opportunities Survey* using a self-administered mailed questionnaire administered after up-to-date *Statistical Profiles* had been widely distributed throughout the Region. The key findings of this survey were dispatched to RDMs for distribution to provide a firm basis for discussion and strategy formation at the sub-regional level where RDMs could provide direction and leadership.

The second phase of consultation involved a one-day Consultative Committee Workshop chaired by the Study's Project Managers and structured around the presentation of draft sub-regional development strategies drawn up by the RDMs after extensive consultation at the sub-regional level. These draft strategies had to be subjected to the close scrutiny of the other RDMs and the Project Manager - a process designed to strengthen their strategic thrust and sharpen their focus in the light of a thorough assessment of each Sub-Region's resource base

and recent demographic and economic trends. A further anticipated outcome of this Consultative Committee Workshop was the emergence of clear policy pointers, where common ground was perceived to exist, that would assist in framing the overall regional development strategy for the Region as well as draft recommendations for Study Management Committee consideration.

The third consultation phase involved placing these refined draft strategies on the public discussion agenda, and by means of a professionally facilitated one-day Public Workshop, test the response to the main elements of the emerging overall development strategy.

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The fourth and final consultation phase was designed as an Expert Panel Review of what were now approaching the final strategies and recommendations of the Study. The Expert Panel could seek clarification from RDMs, or any key player who did not mind being identified, on any aspect of the sub-regional strategies. This was a watchdog function also insofar as the Expert Panel could verify the sources of particular strategic policy strands. The Expert Panel was also entrusted with the task of ensuring that the overall CQ development strategy was consistent with and supportive of each of the five sub-regional strategies despite the distinct possibility of the non-emergence of a congruence of interests on all issues.

Two key features of the original consultation agenda were: (i) heavy reliance on RDMs to provide regular feedback to their organisational membership on the interim findings of the study, while at the same time ensuring that community feedback and other input was delivered to the Study Team, and (ii) through local media and informal channels progressively disseminating vital demographic and economic information on each sub-region, so that each successive consultation phase could proceed on a more informed basis.

The Need for Further In-depth Consultation

The decision by the Queensland Government Department of Business, Industry and Industrial Development (DBIRD) to conduct a series of six LGA-based Future Search Workshops in the Central West Sub-Region in mid 1992, which led to a further five of these workshops being conducted in the Central Highlands Sub-Region, provided a considerable deepening and enriching of the consultation process in these sparsely populated areas.

Furthermore, the opportunity for the CQ RED Study Project Manager and a member of the Study's Management Committee to participate in the co-facilitation of four of the Central West Future Search Workshops led to the conclusion that the *Needs and Opportunities Survey* on its own was incapable of providing the necessary strategic directions for the Mackay, Rockhampton and Gladstone Sub-Regions that would not have the benefit of the enthusiastic community commitment generated by these interactive front-end planning exercises. There was a need for further in-depth consultation.

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Additional insights were provided through another DBIRD / LGA jointly funded project in which two members of the Study Team were involved - the Miriam Vale Economic Strategy Study. In dealing with a single LGA it soon became evident that there were important key players, who for one reason or another may not be represented by the relevant RDO and that one-to-one contact often provides valuable information that would not surface in the environment of a Future Search Workshop. A third DBIRD funded initiative in the form of input-output projections from 1990 to the year 2001 for the Mackay, Fitzroy and Central West Statistical Divisions directed attention towards the need for global projections for the major CQ commodity items in order to vest the study with more robust strategic content.

The result of taking these considerations into account was a considerable expansion on the

Study Brief "to incorporate in-depth interviews of key private and public sector stakeholders and to assemble and interpret global commodity projections for the main CQ commodities viz coal, beef, grain, wool, sugar, cotton and minerals" (p.21). To accomplish these additional tasks a further \$40,000 funding was needed and the original study time-frame had to be extended by five weeks.

In-depth interviews were conducted with selected key private sector players in each of the three coastal sub-regional using experienced interviewers who were subsequently de-briefed by the Study's Project Manager. A similar set of interviews was designed and carried out with public sector regional managers.

These in-depth interviews provided clearer direction on a whole range of issues that had been raised through unsolicited information provided by the *Needs and Opportunities Survey*. The findings of both these finely targeted exercises supported those yielded by the Future Search Workshops and the *Needs and Opportunities Survey* but provided better information for priority ranking and subsequent strategy design.

Conclusions

A range of information gathering instruments, including Future Search Workshops, attitudinal self-administered questionnaires, in-depth interviews with selected key players, structured workshops with coal-face operators, (RDOs), professionally facilitated public workshops and one-to-one structured discussions between Study Team members and community representatives, can be effectively combined to ensure that bottom-up input is genuinely engaged in the regional strategic planning process.

Moreover, the continuous provision of selective strategic information and summaries of the interim findings of the Study increases the quality of community input and encourages the emergence of strong community commitment and the continuation of community involvement through the formation of constructive alliances with professionals. Genuine consultation throughout the successive stages of a study leads to greater community awareness of the need to plan now in order to create desirable futures. The mix of bottom-up and top-down that is contained in the final product is difficult to ascertain as the original source of an idea or strategy element tends to be overlooked in the interactive planning process. A sense of partial

ownership in the end result is evidence that the proposed set of strategic directions is the product of a joint effort.

The important role of the RDM in maintaining continuity of interest at the sub-regional level was demonstrated clearly in the case of the CQ RED Study. The RDMs created the collaborative environment to ensure the blending of bottom-up and top-down input in a manner with which all participants were comfortable. •

Sources and Further Information

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FUNDING OF REGIONAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATIONS

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Introduction

Regional development organisations (RDOs) primarily aim to increase the pace and diversity of economic growth in their localities or, where adverse structural change requires economic adjustment, to avoid or reduce the rate of economic decline. Economic growth and rising population benefit regional communities in many ways: lower unemployment, more services, better quality living environments, and lower out-migration, to name but four (Mason and Smith, 1992). Thus RDO programs tend to emphasise economic policies and strategies more than social and environmental considerations. That is also true, even when the programs pursue strategic defence or political ends.

In common with other developed countries, Australia has two main models of funding for RDOs: the "top-down" approach, where central (State or Federal) government provides the funds and the objectives; and the "bottom-up" approach, where a regional or district community provides the bulk of the funds and determines the objectives.

In Australia, the life of regional development organisations tends to be short, that is, less than 10 years. A common reason for the closure or major re-orientation of such organisations is lack of money, either because government funders have changed their program or have withdrawn for other reasons, or because private funders discontinue their support. Short life cycles mean a lack of career paths for staff and of expertise at the management committee level. Equally, it could be argued that governments also lose the pool of practical experience and knowledge gained at the regional level.

In view of these deleterious effects, funding arrangements are important, especially where funding is insecure and funders' demands are contradictory or unclear. The trend internationally during the last decade has been