7. Rethinking Community in the Face of Natural Resources Management Challenges

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Introduction

As with natural disasters in the past, the devastating floods that inundated local communities in southern Queensland, northern New South Wales and Victoria in December 2010 and January 2011 brought out some inspirational examples of communities standing together to face an unexpected crisis. Something similar happened in the wake of the Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria, yet the dispersal of the survivors and the passage of time made it hard to sustain the heightened 'sense of community' over the following years. Community, we like to think, is there when we need it most, yet at a time in human history when people move around more than ever and when all kinds of unexpected crises seem to emerge, it is getting harder to sustain a sense of community. More than at any time in history, now community has to be consciously created and recreated.

The author of this chapter was not directly involved in any work on the *Guide to the proposed Basin Plan* produced by the Murray–Darling Basin Authority (MDBA 2010). He was, however, disturbed at the way in which the Guide was communicated to local basin communities that will be affected by new restrictions on water diversion and was not surprised at the angry response to the Guide. While the MDBA (2010:37) claimed that it had drawn on the 'best available biophysical and social science and knowledge' in drafting the Guide, it certainly did not draw on the best available knowledge relating to community consultation and 'engagement', and hence it missed an important opportunity to sell the case for water reform. Indeed, the word 'community' is used loosely and ambiguously in the literature of the MDBA and this shows neglect for the important work of Melbourne-based academic Susan Kenny in documenting the emergence of community-development practice in Australia over the past four decades (see Kenny 2006). Furthermore, the Guide should have been guided by work done outside Australia on the role of community in relation to natural-resource conservation (for example, Agrawal 1999). More serious consideration of the sociological literature on community and community development

might have helped the MDBA avoid the mistakes it has made in putting the case for water reform to affected communities, and an investment in community development would change the dynamics in regard to community 'engagement' with water reform. The author draws on his recent research on the sustainability of local communities in Australia and in post-tsunami Sri Lanka to suggest new ways of thinking about the nature and role of community in addressing past mistakes in regard to natural-resource management.

The Murray–Darling Basin (MDB) communities were still recovering from the longest drought on record when the MDBA Guide was released. This was an ideal time to have a serious conversation about the need for reform because the need had become manifest and a crisis can often remind us of our need for community. At the same time, people can sometimes respond to threats and crises by becoming more parochial—that is, by retreating to rather narrow and often outdated conceptions of what constitutes the local community. The irony is that farmers and rural communities might be ahead of everyone else in understanding the need to eliminate wasteful practices in regard to water use and yet they have reacted badly to any attempt to 'impose' water reform 'from above'. We have seen that affected people and communities can react to 'rational arguments' for water reform with 'irrational' emotional responses and a kind of 'siege' mentality. But this should not come as a surprise. US psychologist Paul Slovic (for example, 1987, 2010) has long pointed out that perceptions of risk will often trigger 'irrational' emotional responses, and people working with vulnerable people and communities should know this. The failure to respond appropriately to 'irrational' responses will only compound the problem and give rise to reactive and parochial notions of community. Sadly, parochialism has become even more dangerous in a world of increasing global integration—faced with growing challenges of sustainability—and there is certainly an important role for agencies such as the MDBA to play in combating parochialism. In regard to water reform in the MDB, the MDBA and State and Federal governments clearly have to ensure that the burden of 'readjustment' is spread equitably across the basin. Yet people who have responsibility for engaging local communities in water reform need to have a much better understanding of how people and local communities will perceive and experience risk.

It does not help that the widespread flooding in early 2011 has created new confusion about the need for water reform in the Murray–Darling Basin. For example, in January 2011, the new Victorian Premier, Ted Baillieu, publicly contradicted Victorian Governor, David de Krester, in saying that the flood crisis did not confirm the dire warnings of climate scientists. Indeed, Baillieu claimed that the flooding flew in the face of earlier predictions about the increasing prevalence of drought, and he suggested that resilient Victorian communities already know how to cope at times of crisis. The problem is that climate

scientists have predicted an increase in the frequency and intensity of 'extreme weather events', rather than a 'linear' increase in aridity, and the past can be only an approximate guide for such a daunting future. Having been thoroughly briefed on all this, Baillieu has little excuse for joining the ranks of the climate change 'sceptics'. Local communities, however, can be excused for feeling very confused about what the future might hold, and contradictory statements by public figures do not help.

The 2010–11 flooding did ease immediate pressure on water flows in the Murray–Darling Basin, yet this can be seen as providing an opportunity to proceed a little more deliberatively with the task of convincing local communities of the ongoing need for substantial reforms to water allocations. Flooding has provided an opportunity to talk of the need to be prepared for different kinds of extremes—rather than drought alone—because floodwaters might provide temporary relief for stressed ecosystems but they do little to put farming on a more sustainable basis. The recent, record drought might have blinded many to the ongoing threat of flooding, yet the real challenge is to be ready for anything that an increasingly fickle climate might throw at us. Now we can draw on recent, lived experiences of drought, devastating bushfires and widespread flooding to make the argument that we need to have all kinds of contingency plans in place for what could lie ahead. In this sense, droughts and floods can be linked—rather than counterposed to each other—and the good news is that this kind of link lies deep within the psyche of rural Australian communities. The Brisbane-based writer John Birmingham (2011) made this point rather well in his newspaper commentary on the flooding in his home state. It is no accident, he reminded his readers, that Australians have long taken to heart the sentiments expressed in Dorothea Mackellar's famous poem about life in the 'sunburnt country'. We might well turn to poetry to speak from the heart about what it means to live in this land, Birmingham wrote, because

> …we love its extremes, as Dorothea Mackellar knew. Its droughts and flooding rains, its pitiless skies, its beauty and its terror. We have made a compact with the land, that we will remain forever wary of her harshest and most dangerous moods, as long as she will abide by our presence to at least some extent.

Maybe this expresses better than a rational discourse on the need for water reform the ways in which we need to rethink our relationships with nature in the 'wide, brown land'. It suggests that our very identity is bound up with the need to respect the tough conditions that can make life on the land unsustainable. We become a community, rather than a host of discouraged individuals, to the extent that we can make a compact with the land.

Seeking Community

On a global scale, several prominent sociologists have suggested that 'community' has become a search for a more secure sense of belonging in an increasingly insecure world (see, for example, Bauman 2001; Delanty 2003; Rose 1999). In a world of systemic flux and uncertainty, it has indeed become more difficult to pin down what the word community actually means, and many sociologists have noted that it can mean very different things to different people (for example, Sennett 1986; Walmsley 2006). As Cohen (1985) and Delanty (2003) have argued persuasively, however, the ambiguities embedded within the word community do not mean that we should turn our backs on the strong, even increasing, desire for a sense of belonging to community. The desire for community should, however, be seen as an aspiration rather than a description of particular social structures or relationships.

We tend to use the word community even more loosely in Australia than in countries such as Britain or the United States in that we can switch easily from talking about local communities to talking about things such as 'the Victorian community' or 'the Australian community'. Clearly, it is useful to talk about the diversity of local communities that live in the extensive Murray–Darling Basin, for example, and yet this use of the word community can also mask the diversity of lived experiences in settings that might range from the suburbs of Canberra to a remote community in western New South Wales. In one sense, the word community provides an entry point into some of the more intangible aspects of local life. On the other hand, the fact that the identity of any one community can always be contested means that the desire for a settled conception of community will always remain beyond reach—as an aspiration to strive for rather than a reality to fall back on. The dangers of parochialism can be countered by working towards the constant creation of more inclusive and more resilient communities. This conception of community formation—as distinct from community per se—helps to orient discussions of community towards the future rather than a romanticised notion of the past. It can also help people to collectively face up to the kinds of future challenges that might otherwise open up division and conflict. Narrow claims about the identity of any particular community will always create 'insiders' and 'outsiders', and that can be dangerous when the community is facing significant challenges.

We need to promote future-oriented conceptions of community rather than backward-looking, or parochial, ones. The notion of 'inter-generational equity'—which was central to the conception of environmental sustainability introduced by the famous Brundtland Commission report of 1987—helps to focus the mind on the future. We need to think more concretely, however, about how to make this abstract concept work within the lived experiences of the

local communities that will be affected by water-reform policies. At the same time, we need to understand that parochialism is often borne of fear about the unknown. If the *desire* for community does reflect a search for a more secure sense of belonging in an increasingly insecure world, it is hardly surprising that claims about the identity of a community under some kind of threat will often be tinged with anxiety and emotion. Discussions about community are rarely 'rational' and that is just the way it needs to be. Indeed any attempt to turn the future of any particular community into an entirely rational discourse is likely to backfire.

The suggested point of departure, then, is that community is not a social structure but a set of contestable claims about identity and belonging in a rather insecure world. A sense of belonging to community is no longer the 'given' that it might have been 50 years ago. If we think of community as an ongoing process of formation and reformation—or creation and recreation—then parochialism will be kept in check provided we aim to construct an inclusive projection of a community identity. What makes the argument for inclusion even stronger is that diverse local communities are likely to be more resilient and adaptable because they will contain a greater store of knowledge and experience to draw from. You only have to think about the contribution that many immigrants have made to Australian society to understand that social and cultural diversity opens up new possibilities for local communities. Yet fearful communities will often turn against 'strangers' and 'outsiders'. Here again, the arguments for inclusion need to be grounded in the real-life experiences of many local communities rather than on the basis of an abstract argument.

As mentioned, a sense of community often emerges most strongly at a time of crisis and we see this time and again in the wake of natural disasters such as bushfires and floods. It is, however, hard to maintain that 'heightened' sense of community when the harsh realities of recovering from trauma set in or when things eventually return to 'normal'. We can all remember the times when a community has rallied to help those in need, and big community events—such as commemorations or festivals of various kinds—can help to sustain a sense of community. At the same time, it might be better to anticipate future crises and challenges and build an inclusive sense of community before it is put to the test. There is a clear role for local government in this regard, and the author was involved in a major study exploring the importance of community art for effective local government in Australia (Mulligan and Smith 2010).

An Inter-Generational Conception of Community

As the Brundtland Commission report put it, one way to focus the mind on the future is to think about the opportunities that our own children or grandchildren might have in comparison with the opportunities we had ourselves. Of course, a changing world is constantly creating new opportunities for younger people, but the notion of environmental sustainability—first introduced by the Brundtland report—raises big questions about the challenges that might arise from the depletion of the world's natural resources. When we bring this kind of thinking about the future down to the level of a local community it also raises questions about the forms of employment that might be available to people living in that particular community and this, in turn, raises questions about the resilience and adaptability of the local economy.

In earlier research on community wellbeing for the Victorian health promotion agency VicHealth, the author conducted fieldwork in four different local communities in Victoria, ranging from inner-urban St Kilda to the rural and regional community centred on Hamilton in the Western District of the State (see Mulligan et al. 2006). Perhaps the most positive case study looked at the community centred on Daylesford in the central highlands of Victoria. Not long before we began our research for VicHealth in this community, it had faced a major challenge when the State Government had announced its intention to phase out logging in the surrounding Wombat State Forest. Initially, this sparked division between people living in several small towns surrounding Daylesford, which had been historically dependent on the timber industry, and those living in Daylesford and Hepburn Springs who had become dependent on the burgeoning tourism industry. In part, this threatened to drive a wedge between the 'old community' of residents who had been born and bred in the area and the 'new community' of people who had moved into the area after the town started to experience a resurgence in the late 1970s. As the tensions were rising, however, the government invited the local community to come up with a 'community' plan for how to manage the Wombat forest as a community resource in the future, and this proved to be a circuit-breaker. It became a circuit-breaker because of the role played by two individuals from the 'rival' communities.

Peter O'Mara was a youth worker for the Hepburn Regional Health Service who had moved to the area from Melbourne because he was attracted by both the natural environment and the history of the area. He had a strong interest in the arts and had helped to popularise poetry readings at the local Cosy Cottage Café in Hepburn Springs. As a youth worker, Peter knew that many young people were not benefiting from the boom in local tourism and he was in touch with many families from the 'old community' who were feeling very anxious about the employment opportunities for their children. Peter put himself forward to

chair the community consultations about the future of the Wombat forest and his credibility with families from the 'old community' encouraged some of them to come to the meetings and listen to what others had to say.

The other person who played a key role was a second-generation timber-mill owner, Jim Dwyer, who had already reached the conclusion that the timber industry was not the best future option for his own children. By changing the ways in which he sourced logs and processed the timber in his mill, Dwyer had already made adjustment that enabled his mill to continue when others had closed and he was able to show that there could be some ongoing employment for experienced timber workers. At the same time, he argued that the growth of tourism had given young people in the area more opportunities for employment and he agreed that conservation of 'old-growth' areas within the Wombat forest was important for maintaining and even expanding tourism opportunities. Dwyer was convinced by the argument that some loggers might even find a new career as knowledgeable forest guides. Between them, O'Mara and Dwyer were able to bring potentially warring communities together to work on a plan for future employment in the area that would aim to ensure employment opportunities for people who had previously worked in logging. Sadly, the State Government did not follow through on the particular proposals that came out of the community meetings—as it had promised—but the need to focus on future employment opportunities for the young had swayed the community in favour of forest conservation. A broad consensus was achieved that logging in the Wombat forest should be phased out provided alternative employment was found for timber workers who would become 'redundant'. O'Mara, in particular, then worked hard, and with considerable success, to make sure that the local shire council looked after the interests of former timber workers.

A second example of appealing to inter-generational sentiment relates to work carried out by researchers from the Globalism Research Centre in association with a community reference group in the Hamilton region of western Victoria. In this case, the local community had been rather divided about whether or not the threat of global climate change was real, and RMIT researchers were invited to run a scenarios-mapping exercise in order to grapple more fully with future uncertainties, including climate change predictions. The community reference group worked very hard to bring together a diverse array of community members in selecting about 40 people to participate in the two-day workshop that began with some of the modelling carried out by the CSIRO for the region and then worked through a number of plausible, yet challenging, future threats over a period of 30–50 years. A very experienced 'scenarist' was employed to run the workshop and, as expected, it resulted in the elaboration of a range of challenging scenarios for the region. The process took an interesting turn, however, when two experienced local writers—one of whom had participated in

the workshop—took the outcomes of the workshop to create a single, complex scenario for the future into which they set four different stories focusing on how different characters might respond to the challenges (see Mulligan et al. 2009). Several of the characters who were integrated into these stories had been sketched out by participants in the scenarios workshop and the writers went back to some of the participants to make the characters and the situations in which they would find themselves more plausible, yet no less challenging to contemplate.

In part, this exercise forced the workshop participants to think of what the future might be like for younger people currently living in the region. In developing the four stories, the writers were interested in finding out what might make some people more resilient than others when facing unexpected challenges and they called their collection of stories 'Unexpected Sources of Hope'. The stories were able to deal with, for example, inter-generational issues within a farming family, and one story focused on a young man with artistic talent, raised by a struggling single mother, who was able to use his own 'survival skills' to become a very effective youth worker. In another story, the district was asked to take in an allocation of climate 'refugees' from an inundated area in southern Vietnam, and their settlement process was quite painful. Yet one young member of that community decided to stand for mayor 20 years on and she used her campaign speech to pay tribute to those people within the community who had gone out of their way to help the new settlers. We do not know if she succeeded in the election.

Finding Ways to Link the Local with the Global

Parochialism reflects, of course, a desire to hold at bay a number of disturbing 'outside' influences. This option is, however, becoming less and less tenable. Major changes in transport and communication technologies and the social and economic processes that are commonly referred to as 'globalisation' mean that local communities are more heavily integrated into global realities than at any other time in human history. Rural communities in the Murray–Darling Basin certainly understand that fluctuations in global markets for the things they produce can affect them very directly, and this point was driven home by the recent global financial crisis. No-one can hide from the consequences of global climate change, and future global shortages of oil will affect rural communities more than others. At the same time, globalisation also means that people have ready access to a vast store of information and ideas and enterprising people and communities can find new 'markets' for their ideas or products.

For reasons of history and geography, Australian society tends to be even more 'insular' than others. It is easy to imagine that we are far from the 'troubles' afflicting other parts of the world, and even within our own large land it is easy for local communities to believe that problems can be solved 'somewhere else'. Global realities might be making this kind of parochialism less tenable but more work needs to be done to overcome Australian insularity and convince local communities that there are great advantages in engaging consciously and directly with global challenges and influences.

The UK-based banker Nicholas Stern made this point forcibly in his now-famous 2007 'report' for the British Government on the economics of climate change. Indeed, Stern argued that those regions and nations that adapt early and proactively to the realities of climate change will find themselves at the cutting edge of new global industries. On the other hand, the economic cost of adapting will grow with the passage of time. Of course, not all economists agree with Stern's analysis, but there are already some examples of local Australian communities that are benefiting from being early adaptors, even if the benefits are rather uneven and sometimes unexpected.

Perhaps the most prominent example focuses on the Victorian town of Castlemaine and the surrounding Mt Alexander Shire. In this area a group of local community leaders got support from the CSIRO to introduce energy-saving strategies at the level of households and local businesses. While this can be seen as an energy-saving strategy that has been only partially successful, what was even more important was the way the initiative galvanised the local and regional communities and created new support for participating local businesses. New energy-efficiency businesses began to emerge and interested people decided they wanted to come to live in the area. Before the initiative, Castlemaine was already building a reputation for being a rather dynamic community, with a thriving arts sector. The Castlemaine 500 initiative—so named because it aimed to convince 500 households to adopt energy-saving technologies—raised the town's profile even further and created a new 'buzz' within the community. Of course, the downside of this has been a 'gentrification' of the area, resulting in a surge in real estate prices. As was the case with Daylesford earlier, this has created tensions between the 'old community' of residents and the newer settlers. Nevertheless, there has been a clear benefit to the local economy as a whole, even if action needs to be taken to ensure that the benefits are widely shared.

Researchers from the Globalism Research Centre (GRC) are involved with an initiative in another Victorian town—Coleraine—that has also managed to 'pull itself up by its bootstraps' in recent times. The Coleraine community responded to the closure of all commercial banks in the town by setting up its own successful community bank—under the auspices of the Bendigo Bank—and it is now

working with the local water authority, Wannon Water, on an ambitious plan to use waste water from the sewage-treatment plant to supplement food production and improve environmental flows in the local waterways. Through the GRC, the Coleraine community invited an Indian botanist with great knowledge of the propagation and use of mushrooms for a residency in the town and, as a result, the waste-water project is now also looking at ways to propagate mushrooms as a food source and for use in 'bioremediation'. A Coleraine Enterprise Co-operative has been formed to build stronger community support for an ambitious waste-recycling plan in the town. While this project is still in its development phase, it has won support from the Southern Grampians Shire Council, which is using it as a model for community planning across the shire.

While it has become more possible for local communities to take advantage of global linkages it is never easy to 'go it alone'. The international Transition Towns network is a good example of a global initiative that can help local communities to become proactive about the future challenges of sustainability. It is interesting to note that the Transition Towns initiative, which began in the United Kingdom, was inspired by the principles of 'permaculture' that were first developed in Australia (Hopkins 2008). A range of local communities in Australia has adopted the aim to attain and maintain their status as a 'transition town' and that number is likely to grow.

Moving Beyond Localism to Achieve Equity in Responding to Sustainability Challenges

While parochialism is one danger, it is also unreasonable to assume that particular local communities should pay for the sins of the past in relation to natural-resource management. Obviously, many local communities in the Murray–Darling Basin felt that they were being asked to bear the brunt of the economic costs of the historic water-reform proposal when the MDBA Guide was released in late 2010. Much more needed to be done to develop alternative economic development and employment plans at the level of the communities that will be most affected. The MDBA Guide talked broadly of opportunities for alternative employment in a national economy that is still suffering from skills shortages and it outlined some of the economic benefits to be gained by making water use more sustainable. It soon became obvious, however, that such arguments did little or nothing to reassure local communities that their economic and employment interests had been seriously considered. The transition planning for the economic adjustments that would enable serious water reform took place at the wrong scale for affected communities and it was too easy for them to conclude that their specific interests had been 'sacrificed' for the sake of the environment.

The community-level transition planning that took place in the Daylesford area after the Victorian Government announced the phase-out of logging in the Wombat State Forest points to a very different way of engaging local communities in thinking about their alternatives because the conversation happened at a level that seemed real to the community. Of course, there are hundreds of local and regional basin communities facing an economic 'adjustment' in the wake of water reform and it would be a long and difficult process to engage them all in community-level economic planning. Furthermore, there is a clear need for a body such as the MDBA to ensure an equitable investment in all the affected basin communities. The long-term benefits in terms of 'bedding down' reforms that will have widespread community, and therefore political, support must, however, be considered. Priority could, and should, be given to local and regional communities facing the biggest economic 'adjustments', but the key argument here is that the process for engaging local communities in transition planning needs to proceed at the right scale and at the right pace. Such transition planning needs to be deliberate and inclusive rather than hasty and 'imposed'. Furthermore, the local communities need to be convinced that the national government is determined to make sure that they will not pay an undue 'cost' for rectifying historical mistakes in regard to the use of water resources. The flooding of early 2011 has sparked new calls for a national 'disaster fund'. Perhaps we need a national 'disaster and readjustment fund' to make sure that as a nation we can take responsibility for rebuilding, relocation and new forms of economic development within communities that are particularly vulnerable to natural disasters and to the kinds of reforms needed to ensure a much more sustainable use of the nation's natural resources.

There is a need for community-level transition planning and there is also a need for household-level 'readjustment'. The author was involved in a major study of post-tsunami recovery in Sri Lanka and India, which, in part, concluded that it is important to have a focus on household incomes rather than individual incomes (see Shaw et al. 2010) because this opens up the possibilities for households to diversify their sources of income. Less formal arrangements can be made to deliver better food security at a household level (for example, home gardening, community gardens and forms of bartering). More could be done to increase food security at a local and regional level in Australia and more could be done in general to look at ways in which the 'informal' economy can supplement the formal economy in delivering greater household food and income security.

As difficult as it appears to be at present, we need to build a stronger political consensus on the need to adequately address the long-term challenges of sustainability in Australia. There must be a role for 'civil society' in building that consensus and in trying to ensure that politicians do not continue to use the politics of fear for short-term political gain. In part, the battle needs to

be won at the level of local communities, which might eventually pay a high cost for political inaction. Indeed, it is conceivable that rural communities, which currently sit on the margins of sustainability, could play a leading role in putting pressure on governments to act with greater foresight and courage. They would need to be assured, however, that the nation as a whole will foot the bill for necessary reform and readjustment. Armed with such a national pledge, community-development workers might have a bigger role to play in building the consensus for reform than the economists who tend to dominate such debates at present.

Australia has many talented and experienced community-development workers in local communities right across the country. As mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, Susan Kenny (2006) has effectively documented the emergence, since the 1970s, of skilful community-development practice. Furthermore, there are many more people doing this kind of work who might never use the term 'community development'—perhaps seeing their volunteer work as a form of 'service' to the community that enables them to feel personally 'connected'. The aforementioned study of post-tsunami community development in Sri Lanka and India (Mulligan and Nadarajah 2010) suggested that aptitude is even more important than experience for community-development work. This field of work is, however, not valued as highly as it should be in Australia. Good practice in community development is all about creating more inclusive local communities in order to make them more resilient and adaptable to future challenges. Hopefully, the mistakes made in the way the MDBA developed and released its Guide will serve as a timely reminder that community should never be taken for granted and that people with relevant experience and/or aptitude should be given adequate resources and time to ensure genuine community 'engagement' in meeting the challenges of long-term sustainability. In the end, it is important to remember what Gerard Delanty (2003:195) wrote: 'Community offers people what neither the state nor society can offer, namely a sense of belonging in an insecure world.'

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