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Drought: rain…cash…population…resilience

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Abstract

Towns in central western Queensland are especially exposed to the risks of drought, with approximately half of the businesses directly linked to agriculture. This paper reports on surveys undertaken in 2015 and 2017 of town business.

A significant reduction in turnover is reported by businesses in the region's largest town, Longreach. Populations have declined sharply over the past four years, partly due to itinerant agricultural workers leaving the region.

Townspeople are major contributors to social cohesion and resilience in rural and regional communities. Declining grazier incomes have led to reduced spending in town businesses as well as a negative spiral of declining population and declining services, resulting in lower social resilience in rural and remote communities.

Policy makers have four options: do nothing; understand the local context; support local capacities; and/or transform. Transformation of governance arrangements is crucial if social resilience is to be restored.

Drought assistance can contribute to developing more resilient communities. Recommendations include fostering innovation and changing the roles and responsibilities in collaboration between government and local organisations.

Introduction

Many papers look at the impact of drought on the agricultural sector, but few examine impacts on small town businesses (Schwarz & Williams 2009). This paper presents the perspectives of town business people in Central-Western Queensland (Figure 1) and provides recommendations on how to support these communities. The Western Queensland Drought Committee (WQDC) coordinated two surveys of town businesses in 2015 and 2017, looking at the impacts of drought and drought assistance.

Figure 1. Central Western Queensland shires

Impacts of drought

The population of Central-western Queensland (CWQ) was approximately 12,000 in 2016, with a marked increase in the number of people leaving the region after two droughts (one ending in 2007 and 2013 – current). Declining population compounds issues of a sparsely populated remote region. Many of the tiny towns in CWQ have less than 5 businesses. Part of the decline is due to itinerant agricultural workers, such as shearers, leaving the region (Figure 2). Nearly half of Longreach's 310 state primary school children have left due to drought-related issues since 2008.
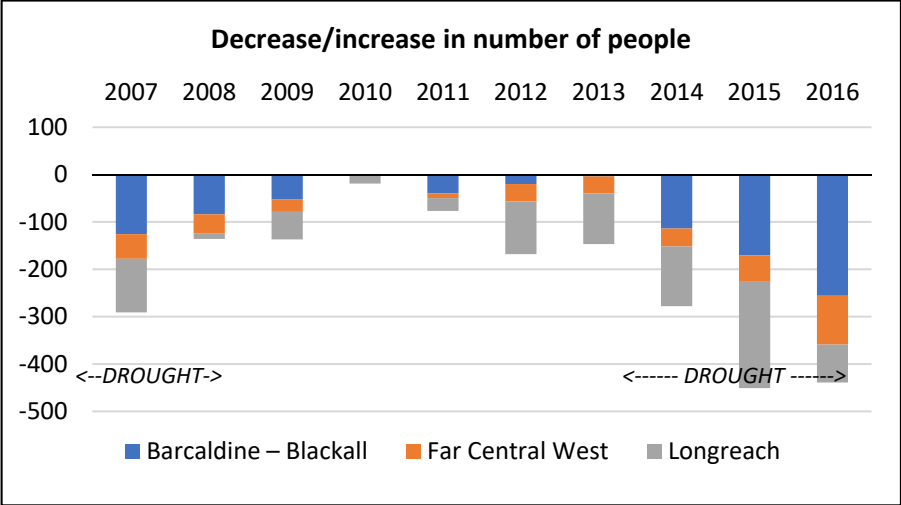
Figure 2. Net migration (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2017)

Town businesses are especially exposed to the risks of drought, with approximately half directly linked to agriculture. The town cash drought is a flow-on effect from rural producers spending less. The effects on all CWQ town businesses are similar to those in Longreach, where businesses reported a 60% reduction in 2014/15 turnover and a 26% reduction in 2015/16.

Social impacts were reported by town business people and the flow-on effects tend to compound (Figure 3). As one person explained: *"There is a critical threshold that, once passed … changes are very hard to overturn"* (Morton 2017:1).
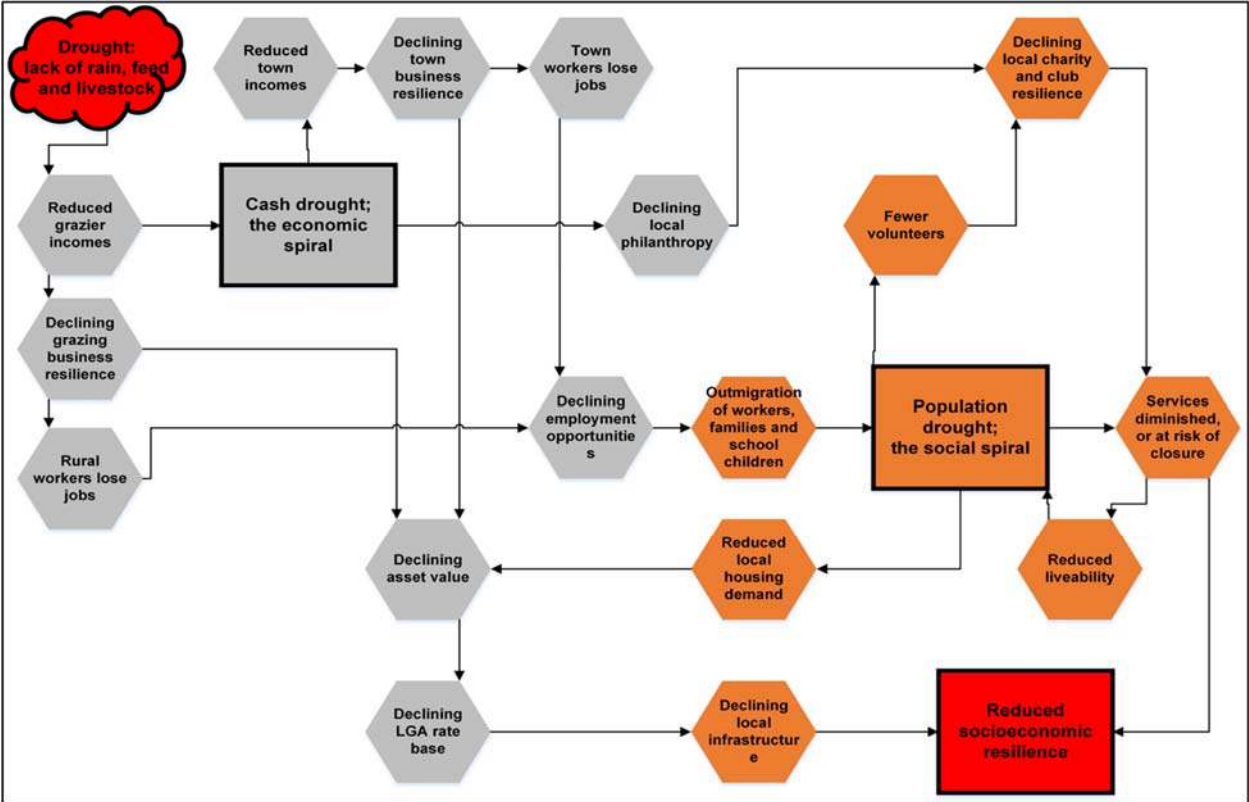

Figure 3. Flow on effects from droughts - rain, cash, population - to reduced resilience

With declining turnover and reduced hours for staff, town businesses cannot afford to support local groups. Financial donations and volunteer time have declined for the Rural Fire Brigade, Meals on Wheels etc. Sports teams cannot find enough people to field a team, meaning there are fewer recreational opportunities. Town people are major contributors to social cohesion and resilience in rural and remote communities. The rainfall, cash and population drought all impact negatively on the social capital of these towns, leading to reduced resilience.

Nature of resilience

Resilience thinking is often used in mental health, disaster management and community development to help people survive disasters, and the emerging literature links prolonged drought and increased mental health issues (Edwards *et al.* 2014). The focus here is on small town businesses, and thus social resilience is most important. Social aspects are often forgotten, yet are vitally important. Social resilience is defined as:

> "*the way in which individuals, communities and societies adapt, transform, and potentially become stronger when faced with … challenges*" (Maclean *et al.* 2014).

Six attributes of social resilience are:
1. Knowledge, skills and learning;
2. Community networks;
3. People-place connections;
4. Community infrastructure and services;
5. Diverse and innovative economy;
6. Engaged governance (adapted from Maclean *et al.* 2014).

For each attribute, policy makers need to decide how to respond. Four options are available (building on Ross *et al.* 2010); these are not exclusive and may be appropriate at different times/situations. The acronym D.U.S.T. is particularly appropriate for the often-*dusty* Central West:

D: Do nothing
Doing nothing may be a valid approach. Not all organisations have a mandate to implement social resilience (Maclean *et al.* 2014). However, it is important for government to understand the consequences of 'doing nothing'.

U: Understand the context
The need to deeply understand the complexities and nuances of the local context was mentioned in CWQ interviews. Understanding may lead to doing nothing, or to supporting existing organisations or transforming governance arrangements.

S: Support existing local capacities and local organisations
Building on existing capacities can help community organisations provide better support.

T: Transform – change is needed
Fostering transformational change in governance arrangements is considered critical because of the deficiencies of policy for rural and remote Australia (e.g. Walker *et al.* 2012).

Several CWQ townspeople expressed frustration that government drought support is only available to agriculture-related businesses, raising issues of fairness and equity. Assuming some changes are required, this paper proposes recommendations to better support rural towns, using the social resilience and DUST categories. Several examples of positive changes have been identified in the Longreach region, and it is one of very few inland regions to be rated with above average adaptability (Productivity Commission 2017).

Policy Recommendations

1.   Knowledge, skills & learning
Some CWQ businesses appreciated expert advice on business management and social media workshops. Training can also help motivate local people to challenge existing governance structures. Nonetheless, education is not the primary determinant of economic outcomes, so it should not be the only government solution (Walker *et al.* 2012).

> *Recommendation*
> * *Encourage place-based assessment of needs, with training based on local needs (U & S).*

2.   Community networks

A few businesses commented on the need to improve community connectedness and collaboration within the region, with comments like: "*More businesses need to work together – maybe start a Chamber of Commerce? So, we can tackle future issues united, not alone*". Community networks are recognised as vitally important for resilience; and are similar to the concept of 'social capital'.

Recommendation
- *Foster opportunities for strong collaborations between business and public sectors (S & T).*

3.   People-place connections

CWQ town people talked about their region with pride, noting that tourism growth is built on natural and historical assets. The strong connection with the place drives people to want to stay to build sustainable livelihoods.

Recommendation
- *Support people's desire to build sustainable livelihoods, built on connections to place (U & S).*

4.   Community infrastructure and services

CWQ people certainly talked about how the drought has affected services in town, with comments such as: "*It has been devastating to watch our small-town population decline due to drought - no farm workers. It has affected the school as well*".

Declining populations invariably lead to reduced spending on infrastructure and services such as hospitals, schools, telecommunications, community and recreation facilities. Maintenance and running costs need consideration, as at least one CWQ council is struggling to keep its community centre open.

External funding is already acknowledged as warranted for some infrastructure, such as roads. Longreach is a transport hub, providing fuel and services for interstate trucks, such as those taking Northern Territory mangoes south.

Recommendation
- *Recognise the wide range of infrastructure that meets state/national needs within public investment models for CWQ (U, S & T).*

5.   Diverse and innovative economy

As noted previously, one of the biggest frustrations of town businesses was that they did not get the same level of support from government as graziers, as evidenced by comments like:
- *"No assistance for small business... we are forgotten"*.
- *"Assistance needs to be fair and equal for all impacted by drought"*.

CWQ people indicated that diversification was occurring, and the tourist industry was a regional economic achievement, even though: *"the tourism business we bought to provide income … was also drought affected"*.

Focusing on innovation helps shifts the focus of economic strategy from markets to capabilities, as one person said: "*(drought) allowed or forced me to expand my work*". The ability to 'do things differently' was seen as essential aspect of coping with drought.

Recommendations
- *Government support for business innovation and diversification, to build resilience to be equitable across sectors (S & T)*
- *Support buy-local campaigns through government operational policy (S & T).*

6.   Engaged governance

People called for changes in the way businesses operate, with a more pro-active approach by government: *"The Government needs to invest in regional Queensland and there needs to be incentive for other businesses to be here"*.

People complained about increased accountability, and centralised decision-making. Transformative changes could mean reversing the roles and responsibilities to allow local problem definition and project management.

Engaged governance revolves around collaborative approaches to regional decision-making (Maclean *et al.* 2014). Institutional reform is perhaps the greatest need in rural and remote areas of Australia (Walker *et al.* 2012). Existing groups such as the collaborative group of seven local shires, called the Remote Area Planning and Development (RAPAD), are heralded as innovative models of local organisational collaboration (Walker *et al.* 2012).

> *Recommendations*
> - *Transform collaborations with government to empower local organisations through enhanced roles and responsibilities (U, S & T).*
> - *Provide support for localised decision-making and local management of projects, ensuring flexibility and responsiveness to local contexts (U & S).*

Conclusion

Resilience is replacing sustainability in the rhetoric of policy (Maclean *et al.* 2017). However, transformation needs to be added to the resilience lexicon to address political and social weaknesses in the current discourse. Community development approaches should not be forgotten, as these enshrine principles of local decision-making and social equity that help communities learn and grow through the disruption of drought.

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