Maleny Working Together: a Research Project for Communities Having to Deal with the Future Now

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Background to the Project

The *Maleny Working Together* project grew from the recognition that our community need to find ways to work together and build our community capacity through partnerships. At a deeper level, this comprehensive research project was about generating a deep understanding of who we are and who we want to be as a community, in the face of on-going change, growth and development.

The story began in 2001 when the Maleny and District Community Credit Union encouraged the formation of a broad-based community group called the Maleny Strategic Alliance. This group submitted a funding application to the Department of Family and Community Services through its *Stronger Families and Communities* program, to conduct a whole-of-community audit, needs analysis and strategic plan. The application was approved in November 2002.

Between February and November 2003, a community based strategic planning exercise called *Maleny Working Together* was conducted under the auspices of the Maleny Credit Union. Project tasks included developing scenarios and a future strategy for the Maleny district (Maleny,Conondale and Witta) in the following aspects - social, political, economic, environmental, technological and cultural aspects of the community. The time horizon was 10 years.

In addition, project coordinators - Jill Jordan and Susanne Haydon - were responsible for producing a:
- community audit
- needs analysis
- sustainablity profile, and
- project model[1]

The project team consisted of the project coordinators and the:
- reference group made up of community leaders
- core project team (including youth worker); and
- extended network of volunteer interviewers and facilitators (including students from Sunshine Coast University)

Project Outline

The project was conducted between February and November 2003 and consisted of the following steps:
1. Plan, research (which included conducting a regional scan) and promote project
2. Establish project team/network of voluntary assistants
3. Build data base of community organisations
4. Prepare consultation kit and train interviewers and facilitators
5. Consult with community organisations and conduct focus groups
6. Survey representative households (1 in 4 in 4552 area)
7. Observe use of community space

8. Conduct community workshop 1 (Maleny, Witta and Conondale)
9. Report on progress at team and reference group meetings
10. Conduct global scan and interview "lateral poppies"
11. Develop scenarios
12. Prepare progress report
13. Conduct community workshop 2 (Maleny, Witta and Conondale)
14. Develop strategic options
15. Produce community audit, needs analysis and sustainability profile
16. Evaluate project and produce final report

Looking into Our Community

The initial key research activities of this project were 8 focus groups; 125 community group surveys; 141 household surveys; and a youth survey.

Focus Groups

The objective of the focus groups was to gather a range of views on local issues through a series of structured conversations. There were 8 x 3-hour facilitator-led focus groups with 10 representatives selected in each group. Participants were selected on the basis of their active interest in the following aspects of community life:

→ political
→ environmental
→ social
→ economic
→ technological
→ cultural
→ government
→ multi-cultural

In summary, the focus groups revealed that local residents feel a strong sense of community. They enjoy - in some cases - revere, the green hills. The positive message is that people here are caring and concerned, smart and hopeful. The negative message is that local residents feel that they can't depend on government for leadership.

Community concerns reflected in the focus groups (in order of priority) are:

• Governance and the need to be heard
• Need to place controls on rapid growth
• Lack of infrastructure/adequate government services
• Maintaining the special character of the area
• Need for greater economic opportunity
• Protecting the environment

Community Group Surveys

With no community group list as a starting point, and after extensive research, 142 community groups were identified covering a range of community interests. These included many sporting, recreational and cultural groups, several groups assisting local economic development, landcare and catchment care groups, groups for older people, the full range of service clubs, many cooperatives and a few youth activity groups. The core team and extended network - including 6 students from Sunshine Coast University - surveyed a total of 125 of these community groups.

Through the community group surveys, we discovered that:

• 70% had been in existence 10 years or more
• 40% have over 100 members
• Almost 90% have an increasing or steady membership
• 50% are very well-networked and almost 60% have existing partnerships with others
• The most important issues identified were: membership (40% of groups) and finances (30% of groups)

Household Surveys

The objective of the household surveys was to obtain a representative sample by door knocking 1 in 4 households across the extensive 4552 postcode area. A total of 411 interval surveys were conducted by the core team and extended network.

In the household surveys, we discovered that:

- Environmental values are strong in this community
- Social and cultural capital are our areas of greatest strength
- Our weaknesses are in the area of economic capital and some aspects of technology
- The community is politically aware but tends to feel disempowered

Youth Survey

The objective of the youth survey was to ascertain the values and interests of the young people living in this community. One hundred Year 8 and 100 Year 10 students from Maleny High School were surveyed by volunteer youth workers.

Through the youth survey, we discovered that:

- Youth in this area feel that they have skills to contribute to the community but are not being asked to play an active role
- Only 10% of Year 8 students surveyed feel that they can achieve their goals by staying in the area
- Approximately 50% of those who say they will leave, see themselves returning because of family and friends.

In summary, the focus groups, community groups and householders told researchers that the Maleny district is rich in environmental, social and cultural capital. Our community groups cover all aspects of community needs and are generally vibrant. The community is fairly IT literate. Although we undertake important environmental practices such as recycling, there is room to broaden these strategies to include solar power, more water tanks and greater use of home sewerage treatment plants. It was identified that we need to focus on affordable housing, local economic development, job opportunities and youth activities. In addition, this community clearly needs a more workable governance strategy (particularly between the community and government).

The first of 2 half-day community workshops were held in Conondale, Witta and Maleny to share our findings with the community. The focus of the first workshop was on 'looking in' and responding to the '3 big questions' that had emerged:

Question #1: "The economic viability of the community"
- → How can we keep the green hills and assist the farmers so they can stay and farm their land?
- → What partnerships can we form to develop strategies? (farmers, 'townies' and government)

Question #2: "Maintaining the special character of the area"
- → How can we retain the character of the Maleny area (eg its housing, older style local shops, etc) while providing the necessary facilities and infrastructure to service an increasing population?

Question #3: "Empowering citizens"
- → What strategy can the community put in place to have democratic representation on matters which effect the future of the district while providing Council (and the local elected representative) with information that can be used in policies and planning schemes for the area?

Looking Out and Beyond Our Community

Following the first workshop, an intensive internet-based scan was conducted by members of the core team with help from three informed volunteers. The purpose of the scan was to develop a roadmap on how this community has been changing in the social, technological, economic, environmental and political aspects. We wanted to identify the key elements of possible emerging stories and to do this we researched global trends in key theme areas. The context we chose for Maleny; our strategic landscape, were islands and the key theme was how might we continue to build bridges or partnerships to connect one island with another.

During the 2-day global scan, the team

explored the evolution of our community: how we have come to be where we are; the impact of external forces on us; and the key concepts that shape our community's identity. This conversation led us to describe 'Somewhereville' (as opposed to 'Nowhereville') and to recognise that there are a number of significant uncertainties in our broader environment that have an effect on us.

Synthesising the Research Findings

In team meetings and discussions between the project coordinators, the combined research findings (qualitative and quantitative) were synthesised. This was a process of discovery where our perception of "who we are" was continually refined within the broader context of world trends. As we synthesised the material, three stories of change began to emerge.

Based on this work, we drafted the scenario outlines from these stories and built the scenarios narratives.

Use of "Lateral Poppies" to Check Our Assumptions

To check our assumptions and the logic behind the scenarios against other mental models and worldviews, we identified three people (who we called our "lateral poppies") from different geographical areas around Australia. Each "lateral poppy" was well known for "speaking out" on the future of community. Each interview took approximately 1-hour and was conducted over the phone. Our scenarios were reviewed and where appropriate, modified in response to these challenging conversations.

Summaries of the Scenarios

The three scenarios that emerged from our research were:
- Business as usual
- Think locally: sell globally
- The calm behind the coast

Business as Usual

In this scenario, population growth in the Hinterland (with its Council based in Nambour) is capped at 120,000 in the year 2050. Retail, construction and tourism/hospitality are still booming. Better roads, infrastructure and public services have made this growth possible. Riding camps, flower farms and a golf course have seen the green hills remain. This is a preferred weekend destination for Brisbane professionals and many have built weekenders. Council backed developments provide a mix of housing ranging from cluster developments to large homes on 1-acre blocks and there is a "gated community" along Mountain View Road. Although family life is important, young people are leaving to find education and employment elsewhere. Young males who stay are involved in trades and young women work as sales assistants, hairdressers and tour operators. There is a Harvey Norman and Flight Centre in Maleny.

Think Locally, Sell Globally

In this scenario, the Hinterland population has grown to just above 20,000. The community is "wired" and with substantial government investment in technology (broadband and telecommunications) many residents are able to work from home and communicate and trade on-line. They call themselves "knowledge workers". This has a flow-on effect particularly for farming, the arts, work and education. The area is host to a wide variety of festivals (both real and virtual) and there is a cultural centre and arts administrator operating out of Maleny. The dairy farms are thriving and the green hills have been maintained through "smart" financing run through the credit union. Local schools are accessing the best educational resources from all over the world through the internet, young people have access to tertiary education on-line and Witta has a vibrant education centre/library.

The Calm behind the Coast

In this scenario, the seniors moved to the Hinterland when the Government removed the exit tax on superannuation and offered a "Last home Owners Grant" to those entering permanent care facilities (combining the comforts of a nursing home with the preferred lifestyle of a country retreat). This type of development has resulted in minimum density housing preserving the green hills and reduced the pressure on the public health system. Land in the Obi and Mary River valleys has become valuable and pricey as developers see a new market for permanent care property opportunities. Conondale, Witta and Maleny are thriving as they offer new services aimed almost exclusively at seniors. Overall employment has grown, particularly in the tertiary sector. Health workers, carers, doctors and nurses have moved in to provide their services, together with gardeners, cleaners, drivers and chefs.

Checking in with the Community

When all the research was nearly completed, a second half-day workshop was held in Conondale, Witta and Maleny. The focus of this workshop was on "looking out", with a focus on six areas of concern: local work opportunities, effective governance, youth participation, affordable housing, opportunities for local economic development and access to technology.

Linking Research Findings and Strategies

The project coordinators were able to report back to the community on the findings of the quantitative and qualitative research and to use this research to determine six strategic options for consideration.

Next Steps

The *Maleny Working Together* project has generated some important outputs for this community, including current snapshots through an extensive community audit, needs analysis and sustainability profile, scenarios and longer-term strategic options for the future of our community and a submission to Caloundra City Council for use in its new Planning Scheme (City Plan).

This information will be used by:
→ The Department of Family and Community Services as a community development model
→ The Economic Development Unit of Caloundra City Council in the development of the economic strategy for the area
→ The Community Planning Division of Caloundra City Council in the development of future community plans
→ Tourism Queensland in local tourism planning
→ Australian Centre of Cooperative Research and Development (ACCORD) as a community development model.

Summary

The *Maleny Working Together* project has delivered a methodology to better know our

community in all its aspects: social, technological, economic, environmental, political and cultural. We have taken a snapshot of where we are now (community audit), where we want and need to be in the future (needs analysis, scenarios and strategic options) and what we, as a community, need to be robust and survive the future (sustainability profile). The benchmark is set here and now with a range of performance indicators that we can use to assess change over the years ahead.

As social researchers, we have applied a variety of techniques to better understand the complex nature of our community. Through community group and household surveys, we have been able to develop quantitative projections. Using qualitative techniques such as focus groups, community workshops and scenarios, we have shared thoughts, ideas and our stories of the future. We have looked both in and outside of our community, searching for others around the world with similar experiences to our own.

As we complete this project and people ask us "what happens next?", we tell them that it's already happening. Whether it's merely synchronicity or whether in identifying what needs to be done we have established an itinerary for our journey, we know that groups have already come together and actions are already underway. It is our intention to revisit the *Maleny Working Together* project in 5 or 10 year time, to see where this journey has taken us and hopefully it will be to an even better place than we are in today.

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Notes

1. his article is a report on the process of the project. It does not provide detail on the contents of the community audit, needs analysis or sustainability profile.