



# Connecting *our* Communities

*Social connection and cultural diversity in regional and rural life*

## **CONNECTING OUR COMMUNITIES: SOCIAL CONNECTION AND CULTURAL DIVERSITY IN REGIONAL AND RURAL LIFE**

*Connecting Our Communities: Social Connection and Cultural Diversity in Regional and Rural Life*, a two-day community-based forum held in Toowoomba in May 2017, explored the ways in which social connection and cultural diversity interact within community life outside large metropolitan centres in Australia.

Social connection creates communities with strong ties, regular interactions and bonds of respect, friendship and shared understanding. Lack of social connection through isolation, exclusion or discrimination can reduce social cohesion and harmony and community members' sense of belonging and participation in local life.

The forum brought together community members, agency workers and community associations from across south-west Queensland and northern New South Wales in a program of keynote speakers, panels, workshops and presentations on regional initiatives. The forum examined how we connect as friends, neighbours and colleagues across our cultural diversity. We considered the many ways in which regional migration, community leadership, employment, education and health care, the family, gender and age, technology, the media and transnationalism affect our capacity to engage with each other within cultural difference.

This communique summarises the key points of our discussions of these issues. Through the communique, we hope to share our thoughts regarding connection and diversity within regional settings with others who may also be engaged in building cultural inclusiveness in their local communities.



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## FORUM COMMUNIQUE

### REGIONAL MIGRATION

The early twenty-first century has been characterised as the age of migration and mass movement of people is reshaping cities, towns and rural landscapes across the globe. In Australia, overseas immigration makes an essential contribution to population growth, economic productivity and community vitality. However, regions nationally are attracting fewer numbers of overseas migrants than large metropolitan centres or peri-urban environments.

Higher levels of regional migration are generated by a welcoming environment, pathways to successful employment and culturally appropriate services and infrastructure, along with supportive ties with emerging community leaders. Regional life offers many benefits to those seeking to establish a new life in a new country: quality of life in a cleaner, quieter environment, small communities with close connections, affordable housing, shorter pathways to services and the opportunity to grow and engage in local activities.

If we are to increase migration to regional areas, we need to make overseas immigration a priority rather than a planning afterthought, actively develop a welcoming attitude to newcomers who are culturally different, ensure jobs and infrastructure are attractive to settling families and develop a positive narrative about regional and rural life that reaches potential migrants during their decision making about where to settle in Australia. In ageing economies facing population decline, we must build equitable regions which ensure that migrants can connect fully with all of the opportunities available to residents.

We need to tell a more multi-faceted story about the role of migration outside our major cities which draws on the long history of migration to regions and its significance in social and economic life. Our cultural diversity must be at the forefront of our imagination about our regions and our self-perception as regional communities. This comes through acknowledging the centrality of immigration within regional development and the dividends for all community members of investing in diversity.

### SOCIAL CONNECTION IN REGIONAL AND RURAL LIFE

Social connection provides the bedrock of cohesion and inclusion and builds cultural capital which enables communities to flourish. Regional communities are highly active in ensuring connection generally among residents through activities, projects and associations and a diverse calendar of local events.

In regional environments, the practices of social connection are affected by distance, space and time. Major centres, towns and villages are separated by distance and open and sometimes remote spaces, while time for travelling must often be factored into face-to-face communication and access to people, places and events. Services can be spread thinly and newly-settling communities from overseas can be dispersed across centres and outlying areas with reduced capacity for sustained interaction.

Regions may have a larger proportion of small and emerging communities settling from overseas than their urban counterparts. Small and emerging communities often lack extended family support, leadership structures, cultural resources and advocacy mechanisms and can experience difficulty in developing a collective life. Their small size can also affect their capacity to engage with more established groups around them. Regional administrators and services can be limited by a lack of fine-grained demographic data needed for service planning and delivery targeted for emerging communities' needs.

### A WELCOMING ENVIRONMENT

A welcoming environment and an inclusive attitude that actively embrace difference are vital for social connection within cultural diversity. Migration and settlement decisions are based as much on the prospect of being welcomed by long-time settlers as by the certainty of employment and the opportunities for a new beginning.

Migration breaks all social connections and disrupts all aspects of personal and communal life. Navigating the





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physical, social and emotional upheaval of migration takes time and energy and is a major stressor for individuals and families. Effective settlement depends upon our willingness and capacity to engage collectively in the long-term project of rebuilding these connections and reducing the impact of a life-changing relocation.

A welcoming environment begins with the individual and is as everyday as a smile, a greeting and an inquiry into someone's welfare. Regional life is full of small acts of kindness, engagement and inclusion: invitations to dinner, a picnic, a sporting event, support with childcare, culturally-based street parties, help with accessing a service or advice on how to get somewhere or find the best supplier of a product.

Residents in regional communities are as positively engaged in sharing their lives, resources and local knowledge as urban dwellers. This micro-level of support and engagement is an important part of a region's story of cultural inclusion but can be overlooked by planners, communicators and administrators as a valuable resource in the goal of attracting and sustaining immigration from overseas. Active support needs to be given to communities to help them engage in and network across this interpersonal level of local welcome and build an environment of inclusion that is easily seen beyond the region.

Regions are also full of small initiatives, run by individuals or groups of people, who volunteer their time, energy and imagination to projects that build connection. These projects are diverse in their focus and can be found in areas as varied as parenting, visual art, sports, music, language learning, gardening, craft, hospitality and interfaith activities. They form a seed bed for larger efforts and create links that build experience, expertise and confidence in community development.

Small community projects are vulnerable to problems of sustainability and can reach a ceiling where funding and infrastructure must be in place to ensure their continuation. Local support by funding bodies and agencies is vital in nurturing this level of community energy and commitment. The combined effect of private acts of connection and small group projects that develop social inclusion helps create a welcoming environment for newly-settling communities from overseas and regional cohesion and belonging.

## COMMUNITY LEADERSHIP

Community leadership within and outside newly-arrived communities helps build commitment to social connection across cultural diversity. The public value placed upon diversity and the resources committed to its development over time depend partly upon community leaders' continued advocacy for social and civic inclusion. Leadership within regional communities can be formal and informal, activated by men and women and across all age groups and take culturally varied forms of expression.

Small and emerging communities may struggle to develop leadership structures, while individuals and agencies outside communities can find it difficult to identify those who are regarded as leaders by community members. New communities can be divided by factional interests and historical conflict and find it hard to develop a collective mechanism for communicating agreed concerns. Intergenerational tensions can arise about the directions that a community should take to promote its welfare.

Communities can be caught between how leadership is developed and realised in regional culture and how it has operated traditionally in their country of origin. Traditional forms of leadership may not be easily visible or understood outside the community. Emerging leaders may also struggle with the small and dispersed nature of their communities and the complexity of their challenges and needs.

While programs developing leaders are an important resource for regions, leadership development also occurs through trial and error and the willingness to share the lessons learnt. Economic pressures and unreliable employment can make regions vulnerable to losing local leaders and create unstable leadership capacity.

Communities face numerous financial, administrative and communication problems when they undertake formal incorporation of new community associations. These associations are a vital and valuable element of a region's leadership environment and turnover of community associations through lack of viability has a negative effect for the whole of the region.

Regions must ensure that local advocacy channels reach into communities to enable their voices to be heard and their needs taken into account.



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Long-established leadership structures such as councils, chambers of commerce and service organisations must prioritise connecting with emerging community leaders to bring new arrivals into public life. Realistic expectations about communities' capacity to generate effective leadership structures and skills as they are settling must also be in place and underpin engagement across communities. Leadership needs to be viewed as a shared practice which all are invested in if cultural diversity in regional and rural life is to work.

## EMPLOYMENT, EDUCATION, HEALTH CARE, FAMILY LIFE AND THE MEDIA

Access to employment, education and health care are affected by culturally diverse communities' connectedness with those around them. Of these key life areas, employment has the greatest impact upon and intersection with social connection. Success in gaining the 'first job' provides the economic platform for all other aspects of settlement and community growth.

The workplace is also an entry point into information and advice about multiple aspects of personal and family life. Further links to services, employment opportunities, education pathways and health care can be facilitated via workplace interaction. In regional life, access to employment has a significant multiplier effect on social engagement and family strength.

In smaller regional labour markets, job opportunities can be accessed via personal networks and knowhow as much as through formalised processes such as recruitment agencies and websites. Individuals and families with limited social networks can have fewer avenues for maximising employment. Young people from settling communities describe how their parents' lack of knowledge about job opportunities and social connections with potential employers can reduce their family's capacity to help them gain entry into the workforce. Prejudice, stereotyping and hostility towards cultural difference negatively affect access to employment and reduce the skill uptake and talent base within a region.

Lack of employment can produce social isolation but also costly and disruptive settlement churn, in which newly-arrived families migrate twice, once to a region

to establish a new life and then a second time to a metropolitan centre for its job prospects. Lack of skills recognition and downward occupational mobility among migrant communities can also contribute to lessened social cohesion within regional life. Local leaders and businesses need to actively engage with the issue of migrant employment to attract skilled workers and families from overseas but also to keep them.

Education provides families with unique opportunities for social connection, via the interactions of children and young people. For learners themselves, engaging with education opens up relationships with others from across a region's communities and opportunities for cultural understanding through shared experiences. Education is a key goal for newly-arrived families yet can also produce cultural and language gaps within family life and tensions between generations. Schools are often the first services to actively engage with settling families through their children and teachers of English as an additional language or dialect are a vital resource in a region's response to the needs of newcomers from overseas.

Migration can bring about increased stress-related health risks for newly-settling communities. Refugee entrants are often also grappling with trauma associated with pre-migration experiences of conflict and displacement. Cultural constructions of wellness, the body and healthcare practices filter how communities engage with health services. Social connection can support new arrivals in entering into a culturally different space of health maintenance. Local health services need expertise in working with cultural and traditional differences in healthcare philosophies and modalities. Language skills and the availability of resources and interpreters in community languages and dialects directly influence access to professional and personal healthcare support.

English language capacity affects entry into significant life areas such as employment, education and health care. Differences in accents, variations in local English across formal and informal settings, the capacity to participate in English language classes, as well as participation in the workforce, also play a role in English language acquisition. Information is not always available in community languages and dialects and interpreting services can be difficult to access and





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an unfamiliar means of communication. Maintaining language of origin is a priority within many migrant communities but can be difficult to achieve without language teachers and where communities are geographically dispersed.

Family structure, gender and age can affect communities' capacity to socially connect. Women with young or large families who have lost the support of extended family networks through migration are vulnerable to social isolation, as are older men and women, especially where there is a reduced access to transport and low English-language levels. Cultural constructions of gender-appropriate activities, interaction and use of public space can affect how adult and young women engage with the world outside the home. Young people can be caught between cultural traditions and family expectations and their own identity and aspirations as members of the local community. Regions need to develop skills and resources to respond to these gendered and intergenerational differences in social connection across communities and within and outside family life.

Media articles and opinion-forming at the national level frame how immigrants perceive Australia as a settlement destination. Local media within regions can tell a positive story about cultural diversity that can shape decisions about where to settle. Regions need to capture the narrative about diversity within non-metropolitan areas and challenge stereotypes that portray regional life as an unwelcoming and unchanging monoculturalism. Opportunities now exist via social media, citizen journalism and self-publishing to also shape the narrative from direct local experience.

## CULTURAL DIVERSITY, TRANSNATIONALISM AND TECHNOLOGY

Increasing cultural diversity within a region leads to the emergence of a transnational community, whose members have lives that reach across cultures, time zones and continents. Social connectedness can flourish within this globalised context even while barriers to engagement can be encountered in the here and now of local life. Obligations for supporting

families overseas, such as remittances, visits and visa sponsorship, place significant stress on migrant communities as they settle. There is a great deal to be learned from settling communities about the use of social media, apps and communication technology such as smart phones in maintaining transnational family life, community networks and a sense of belonging that transcends place.

Social media introduces new arrivals to those already settled and provides information about services, events and resources. Social media can also paint a richer, more nuanced picture of a region's diversity. At the same time, we must be wary of equating social media with social connection, as social media can also create disconnection and isolation.

Web-based services increase the capacity to self-settle but require information literacy skills suitable for a text-dense information environment that communicates mainly in English. Small projects with limited funds can build vibrant physical and virtual communities engaged in enhancing diversity through imaginative use of technology and social media platforms.

Via technology, displaced communities such as resettled humanitarian entrants find relatives and community members lost through conflict and begin to rebuild family and community links. Fears for those left behind can be increased because of the relentless immediacy of news from overseas.

'Smart city' technology that uses open data to manage city life via real-time information about areas such as flood mitigation, vegetation and waste management, parking, acoustics, lighting and telehealth supports the development of innovative and future-oriented regional life. Smart city models based on technology that builds people-to-people connection, beyond the more functional interlinking of devices, can increase capacity for engaging with cultural difference and attract skills, talent and investment.

Cultural diversity must be factored into the smart city equation through initiatives such as culturally inclusive digital literacy programs, innovation networks, sister city partnerships and STEM learning programs that are tailored to a region's emerging demographics. Disruptive technologies, such as drones, robotics,



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autonomous vehicles and machines that learn, which automate and digitise workplaces and create job opportunities but also job losses, can have a differential effect on culturally diverse regional communities that are clustered in vulnerable occupations.

## CONCLUSION

In a world made increasingly diverse through the global movement of people, goods, capital and information, regional and rural areas' capacity to participate in this wider exchange depends in part on how they respond locally to the changing role of cultural diversity and migration in social and economic life.

From the discussions and activities at the Connecting Our Communities Forum, we suggest that strategies developed by business leaders, administrators, agencies, community associations and local residents to increase a region's cultural capacity could prioritise:

- recognising the role of social connection in building strength, prosperity and cohesion in a culturally changing world and making inclusion and belonging the centrepiece of regional development
  - actively developing a welcoming attitude to culturally diverse new arrivals at all levels of the community that also responds to the needs, challenges and stressors of settlement
  - creating a narrative of regional and rural life which foregrounds the value and significance of cultural difference and migration in the region's history and the welcome that is given to newcomers
  - resourcing locally developed projects and activities that encourage social inclusion across communities and promote the value of diversity for the region as a whole
- tackling the challenges of job access that cultural diversity poses for both employers and job seekers to ensure employment security and financial viability for settling communities and retention of skills, talent and expertise in the region
  - including the needs and concerns of culturally diverse communities in regional decision making through effective advocacy and communication mechanisms and the development of strong community leadership
  - connecting leaders from new and emerging communities with the region's established leadership structures and facilitating their inclusion in the development of the region's leadership capacity
  - developing family- and youth-based programs which provide support for new arrivals as they engage with the gender, age and intergenerational issues that settling communities face
  - ensuring that specialist skills and services are in place to strengthen community integration and that services and businesses are culturally competent in their service planning and delivery
  - making certain that the region's embrace of emerging technologies that will alter community interaction, employment and services does not leave behind those from other cultural and language backgrounds.

*Connecting Our Communities: Social Connection and Cultural Diversity in Regional and Rural Life* was held by the Cultural Diversity Hub Toowoomba on 25 and 26 May 2017.

## MORE DETAILS

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