

ICT and Developing Social Capital

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INTRODUCTION

Regional Overview

The Gulf Savannah region (Invest Australia and Gulf Savannah Development, 2003) of north Queensland covers 186,000 square kilometers, an area 80% the size of Victoria. The population of 8,000 live in small towns or Aboriginal communities dispersed across the region and on the large cattle stations and mine sites.

Traditionally, the region has relied on cattle, mining, and fishing for its economic base. Tourism is now fast becoming the leading industry for the area, with around 60,000 plus travelers a year visiting the region. While the basis for this assessment is partly anecdotal and gleaned from local government calculations, a recent study (Greiner et al., 2004) arrives at a figure of around 22,000 visitors per annum for two towns (Karumba and Normanton) in one Shire (Carpentaria). The Savannah Way, a themed adventure-drive linking Cairns on the eastern seaboard with Broome on the Indian Ocean traverses the Gulf Savannah region and was recently launched by the federal Minister for Small Business and Tourism, the Hon. Joe Hockey MP. This destination is now attracting an increased visitation, estimated to be around 14% (Sutcliffe & Olsen, 2004) and provides potential niche enterprise opportunities for small business in the communities.

The beef road network developed by the federal government of Prime Minister Bob Menzies during the 1950s provides a skeletal transport framework for freight, stock, and people, but many sections are rendered impassible during the annual wet season. The road from the east coast to the largest town, Normanton on the Gulf of Carpentaria, a distance of some 700 km, was only sealed in late 2000. The western Gulf, however, is still isolated in the wet season, with the unsealed roads becoming impassible. In the past, long distances and poor roads inhibited travel across the region, and in many communities, vehicle ownership remains low, with more than 20% of dwellings having no vehicle (RIRDC, 2004). Air services link the major Gulf centres with the east coast and the major mining town of Mt. Isa. Until 2002, the cost of air travel was prohibitive and beyond the means of most residents, however, the route is now subsidised by the Queensland Government in order to make the service more accessible for the community.

Before 2001/2002, Gulf telecommunications relied on antiquated and difficult-to-maintain land lines that were frequently damaged by fire and failed in inclement weather. Power supplies were unreliable, with brownouts a common occurrence, leading to equipment damage and failures. Use of ICT was limited, and few residents owned or could use a computer. In 2001, areas of the Gulf were reported as having the lowest proportion of people using computers at home, with less than 5% indicating usage (RIRDC, 2004). Historically, the limited transport infrastructure and the lack of reliable telecommunications and power services presented major barriers to development of the regional economy. Small business, local government, and essential services survived year to year with little change in ownership or business operations.

Inadequate communication, isolation during the wet season, and the long distances to travel over poor roads led the region to be regarded as a frontier outpost by governments of all levels and political hues for decades. To an extent, this isolation has shaped the way the communities regard governments and bureaucracies, creating a spirit of self-reliance and a measure of cynicism in response to government overtures, a factor to be considered for an e-democracy program in the region.

Demographics and Socioeconomic Features

The socioeconomic condition of the Gulf ranks it as one of the more disadvantaged regions in Australia. As reported in the *Social Atlas of Rural and Regional Australia* (RIRDC, 2004), incomes are lower than the state average, there is little secondary industry, and there is a dearth of investment capital. Home ownership is 20% below the nonmetropolitan average, and there is a heavy reliance on public housing. Unemployment is high, with a dependence on the Community Development Employment Program and on government funding, grants, and subsidies. Recent data indicate the number of people on income support and pensions exceeds wage earners in several centres (ABS, National Regional Profile, 2004). Education standards are below par with those of urban areas, with schooling to Grade 10 available in just two centres. Due to the remoteness of the region, locally delivered training is difficult to access. Accommodation for rental is in short supply, with privately owned dwellings rented being more

than 20% below the nonmetropolitan average (RIRDC, 2004), which is a hindrance to business development and expansion and results in overcrowding in some areas.

Community Social Capital

Gulf Savannah Development presented a detailed evaluation of the social capital of the Gulf region at the 2003 SEGRA (Sustainable Economic Growth for Regional Australia) conference (Sutcliffe et al., 2003). Isolated for decades and with a small population, informal networks between family and neighbours were vital for coexistence and support in times of need. As a result, the bonding social capital that developed between families and neighbours of the small communities is very strong. This has been further reinforced by the lack of fluidity in population composition, with new arrivals largely engaged to carry out specialist roles as teachers, police, and local government executives. This social environment gives strength to individuals within the community but is not necessarily conducive to acceptance of change or innovation. Newcomers not privy to the body of shared knowledge and experience feel like outsiders, a fact raised by participants at a series of capacity-building workshops delivered across the region by GSD during 2003.

The bridging social capital or the links to and between organisations and groups tends to reflect the close bonding within the community. Each centre supports a number of small organisations comprising groups of like-minded people, often with the same key members. A common complaint is that the same people attend all the meetings and do all the work.

On the other hand, the linking social capital, the hierarchical and institutional networks from the region to external agencies, institutions, and bodies of influence in areas of higher education, professional groups, commerce, and industry require strengthening to broaden the sources of information flow to the region.

The implications for governance, regional competitive advantage, and business development were clear. To address this imbalance, GSD turned to the use of ICT as a tool to encourage communities and businesses to develop networks outside the region, to interact with governments and organisations with a view to generating knowledge of and trust in institutions beyond their immediate environs.

Existing Regional Governance and ICT

The level of trust within a community can be an indicator of the social capital of that community, whether trust is viewed as an element of social capital or as an outcome of social capital (Productivity Commission, 2003). All tiers of government have a role to play in building the social

capital of a region, a key aspect of which is to build trust and confidence in governance at all levels. In the Gulf, Commonwealth and state agencies do not have permanent offices, apart from police, courts, health, and education personnel, and they are essentially outsiders looking in. For the most part, the local population sees them that way, and interaction between residents and the higher levels of government is sporadic.

Governance is essentially delivered by the five Gulf region Shire Councils. Populations are small, ranging between 350 and 1,800 people, resulting in a low rates base and limited resources, which makes governance and community development over vast areas difficult.

Traditionally, Council activity concentrated on the three Rs—roads, rates, and rubbish. These functions are being added to as Councils play an increasing regulatory role in planning, public health, and the environment, and in developing management responsibilities in the whole area of community and social development, such as health, alcohol and drugs, community safety, and transport infrastructure (House of Representatives, 2003).

As a result, increasingly, the Councils in the region are being called upon to deal with high-level interaction with State and Commonwealth Governments, private enterprise, and the broader community. This has dramatically raised the performance bar for elected representatives and local government employees.

The Gulf local governments have reasonably sophisticated and well-managed IT communication systems for internal communications and external communications with agencies. However, e-communication between the Councils and the wider Gulf community are not advanced, with reliance on more traditional means of contact, such as newspapers and public fliers.

Currently, local government use of ICT to link with the community involves basic information provision but does not extend to development of e-democracy or any form of citizen involvement, such as surveys, data gathering, etc. It is an untapped resource for the ongoing development of social capital in the future.

WINDS OF CHANGE

Post 2000: What a Difference a Road Makes

The final sealing of the 700 kilometres of road between the Gulf region and the east coast created a reliable, almost all-weather, physical link between the Gulf communities and the major centres of Cairns and Townsville, and that had a profound impact on visitation to the area. Data from the Main Roads Department road counters between two of

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