

2014 REGIONAL RESILIENCE

Government austerity measures do impact on regional areas and their resilience, according to research from Southern Cross University.

Professor Robyn Keast, along with Dr Subas Dhakal, researched the factors that contribute to regional resilience using the historic north Queensland town of Charters Towers as a pilot study. The research project was supported through the Australian Government's Collaborative Research Networks (CRN) program.

"Government agencies, businesses, and community organisations are expected or challenged to deliver quality of life and opportunity to regional areas at parity with that experienced in capital cities," she said.

"At the same time, federal and state governments are also facing fiscal and political pressures in order to balance the budget and are increasingly cutting back on 'welfare' and social support expenditure at a time when the needs of regional communities have been actually rising.

"In early 2013, the Charters Towers Neighbourhood Centre Inc (CTNC) partnered with the CRN program at Southern Cross University to explore the ways to enhance the viability and adaptability of CTNCI during financially uncertain time periods.

"We conducted a series of face-to-face interviews and focus groups with staff members. In addition, the contents of CTNC financial reports and annual reports were analysed using automated software (Leximancer)."

According to Professor Keast, CTNC was interested in critically examining the way it does what it does and research or experiment in order to become more resilient as a regional service provider and community resource.

"With the help of SCU, CTNC now has research supported strategies to help them to adapt to change and is exploring the following ways forward including: new business models not funding models; better articulation of value propositions; effectively capturing social impacts; and being in-tune with policy focus" she said.

"The world has changed for these organisations and in order to be resilient they must change with it. However, they, and any government dealing with them, have to ensure that they have the capability and skill set to do so."

The CTNC was established in 1986 when a group of concerned citizens came together to tackle issues around access to low-cost housing. It delivers 11 different services to the regional areas around Charters Towers, an area roughly the size of Tasmania. The CTNC has a total asset base of approximately \$5.5 million, employs 35 full-time staff and 15 support staff and contributes about \$1.5 million per annum to the local economy. They have more than 2000 contacts with clients per month.

"A good example of the effects of austerity on the CTNC was the withdrawal of government by the Qld Government for the Healthy Lifestyle Program. This program was to provide a broad range of nutrition and health-related services to the community," Professor Keast said.

“The program had commenced in 2008, employed three staff members and had registered 15 per cent of the town’s population which had demonstrated tangible behavioural change. That is now gone along with opportunities for social and physical participation for local residents.”

The study points to a growing dilemma for the social services sector. The chase for certainty in funding has the potential to detract attention away from the ethos of service delivery, as well as undermining the connectivity and vibrancy that have been the very heart of its operation.