

Background

July 26 and 27 2023 saw the SEGRA Foundation host the National Regional and Economic Development Summit in Toowoomba, QLD in partnership with Toowoomba Regional Council, Jobs Queensland, Lily's Artisan and Regional Tech Hub.

Following on from 25 years of successful annual conferences, the SEGRA Foundation transitioned its annual event to a Summit that elevated issues in rural, remote and regional Australia, encouraging 'grass roots' contributions and sought commitments for improvements.

With over 80 presenters and speakers from around the country, the two days brought national, state and local leaders, all levels of government and decision makers together with the SEGRA family to collectively work together to solve challenges across the regions.

In an effort to deliver tangible change for rural, remote and regional Australians an hour-long session titled 'Influence and Engage' saw Federal and State politicians, advisors and advocates answering two questions:

- What community engagement models and strategies have been successful in rural Australia and led to influence or impact at the local, state, or national level?
- And; How can we enhance participation in the policy making process and ensure that the voices of rural, remote, and regional Australia are heard?

Attendees took the opportunity to brainstorm real world solutions to the question; **What action would you recommend rural, remote and regional communities do to raise their voices?** The 150 responses identified key themes that can be used moving forward to advocate for the needs of those in our communities.

Key themes and top suggestions

Community Collaboration and Engagement

- Joint planning across geographical boundaries.
- Band with groups in your community to champion shared messaging.
- Create one single body to represent all regional, rural, remote communities.
- The creation of an authentic collaborative group across local, state and federal government and community groups to represent one voice for our region.

Education and Awareness

- Educating the city about the value of regional Australia.
- Promoting what is needed to support regional communities to the nation

Use of media and technology

- Develop and reinstate local media ownership (TV, Newspapers, etc.) featuring regional news, people and issues.
- Creation of a "Getaway" style infotainment TV show focusing on living in the regions as opposed to visiting them.
- Create social media "groups" and cross link with existing town groups to create polls and promote feedback across the board.
- Create a short film about the challenges facing the regional community and share on social media/with politicians etc.

Policy and Legislative Changes

- Advocating for changes in federal and state legislation to prioritise regional, rural, and remote perspectives in decision-making and investment.
- Promoting structural reform through regional local governments.
- Increasing the number of seats in state and federal parliaments from regional areas.
- Decentralise government departments in order to have public servants distributed throughout the region.

Economic Development and Infrastructure

- Coordinating businesses and supply chains in regional areas.
- Increase the percentage of tax revenue allocated to local governments to deliver services and improve infrastructure.
- Encouraging secondary school education on regional economic development.

Community Collaboration and Engagement

In regional, rural, and remote Australia, community collaboration serves as a powerful catalyst for positive change. By fostering a sense of unity and shared purpose, communities can collectively address unique challenges. By fostering a united front, communities can pool resources, share diverse perspectives, and collectively address shared challenges. This collaborative spirit enhances resilience in the face of adversity, promoting social cohesion and a stronger sense of belonging. Collaboration also strengthens lobbying power, allowing these communities to influence policies and decisions that impact their well-being. Whether through the suggestions of joint planning or creating advocacy groups, collaboration ensures that the voices of regional, rural, and remote Australia resonate louder, contributing to a more inclusive and interconnected national dialogue.

Education and Awareness

Education in urban centers plays a pivotal role in transforming the prosperity of regional, rural, and remote Australia. By fostering awareness and understanding about the unique challenges faced by these areas, urban education can integrate these issues into the national consciousness. This education can bridge the gap between city and country, breaking down stereotypes and fostering a

mutual appreciation for the diverse strengths each region brings to the table. This geographical exchange not only dispels misconceptions but also encourages collaborative initiatives, creating a more interconnected Australia where city counterparts actively contribute to the upliftment and sustainable development of their regional allies.

Policy and Legislative Changes

Empowering the voices of regional, rural, and remote communities through strategic engagement with policy and legislative changes is an avenue for change and advocacy. Through active participation in the political process, residents can lobby for tailored policies that address the specific challenges faced by their communities. Engaging with all levels of Government ensures that the unique needs and perspectives of these areas are not overlooked, fostering a more inclusive legislative framework. By voicing concerns collectively, individuals in regional, rural, and remote areas can contribute to the creation of policies that reflect the diversity of their communities, and in turn, build a more equitable and representative Government. By advocating to those in power there is the potential to bridge the urban-rural divide and improve service delivery in often underserved communities. Incentivisation for businesses to invest in regional projects was one key suggestion in ways that political leaders could help boost regional, rural and remote areas.

Use of media and technology

Whether it be traditional media, social media or technology, regional, rural and remote communities can leverage these platforms to share stories, challenges, and achievements, fostering a sense of community and garnering support on a broader scale. More traditional, large-scale media has the opportunity to offer regional, remote and rural communities a platform for in-depth storytelling, shedding light on the nuances of rural life and advocating for tailored solutions. Although challenges currently arise with mainstream media often being based in metropolitan areas, and dwindling financial support of regional media leading to the closure and removal of local news services. By understanding the power of traditional and social media, communities can have control over the stories coming out of their towns, and can strategically use them to create change and raise their voices.

Economic Development and Infrastructure

By actively participating in local economic ventures, residents can influence the direction of growth, ensuring it aligns with their unique needs and aspirations. Many of these ventures need the support of Federal Governments, meaning that these unique issues need to be recognised and addressed at higher administrative levels. It is the locals on the ground who know the needs of their communities best, and therefore need to be consulted with in the creation of economic and infrastructural planning. Through collaborative efforts to shape economic policies and advocate for targeted infrastructure investments, people in these areas not only boost their own communities but also amplify their collective voice, asserting a presence in national conversations.

Top participant suggestions

- Joint planning across geographical boundaries eg. Shires.
- South Queensland cotton milled locally for a collective of textile designers to be made into uniforms for the Olympics, raising South Queensland profiles
- Making the region a favourable destination for international/overseas migrants - investments and opportunities will follow the population.
- Develop and reinstate local media ownership (TV, Newspapers, etc.) featuring regional news, people and issues.
- Regions co-designing their own future - one that is not dictated to them, but is designed by them for our regions future generations to inherit in 20, 30 and 50 years time.
- Empower young people to share their thinking and inspire us all for actions and change.
- One voice - community agree and work together focused on one area.

Conclusion

The SEGRA Summit proved that when addressing how regional, rural and remote communities can elevate and strengthen their voices no one knows it better than those who live in those areas. With over 150 suggestions on ways to push the unique needs of those in smaller communities up to our Federal leaders, there is no shortage of places to start. Key themes identified by attendees included community collaboration and engagement, the use of media and technology, creating awareness and educating others, creating policy changes and investing in economic and infrastructural development. By working with like minded organisations and businesses in our geographical areas for a shared purpose, and using social media to highlight the unique challenges of those living in regional communities, we can raise our voices to create tangible change.