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Small Towns, Big Futures: Backing the Local Power of Rural Australia

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Good morning everyone.

Firstly, thank you to Longreach Regional Council, Peter Kenyon and the Bank of I.D.E.A.S. for bringing us together.

And thank you for welcoming me to Inningai Country. It is a privilege to be here. I'd like to acknowledge the traditional custodians of this beautiful Country and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging, and acknowledge first nations people here today.

I've been lucky enough to visit hundreds of remote, rural and regional communities across Australia during my time with FRRR.

And one thing I've learned is that no two towns are exactly alike.

Different histories.

Different industries.

Different demographics.

Different landscapes.

Different opportunities.

And Different challenges.

Yet everywhere I go, I encounter something remarkably similar.

People who care.

People who are deeply invested in their community.

...who want their town to thrive.

and who are willing to roll up their sleeves and do something about it.

So looking around this room, I suspect I'm among my people.

Not because we all work in the same sector.

But because we all care deeply about place.

About belonging.

....possibility.

About the future of our communities.

And that's what brings us together today.

Reinvention is really about people.

When we hear the phrase "small town reinvention", we often think about economic development.

Main streets.

Tourism.

Population growth.

Infrastructure.

Business attraction.

...Those things matter.

But in my experience, successful reinvention starts somewhere much more fundamental.

It starts with people.

It starts with relationships.

It starts with leadership.

It starts with a community deciding that its future is worth investing in.

Because communities don't reinvent themselves through projects alone.

They reinvent themselves through the people willing to imagine something different and bring others along with them.

Small towns have never lacked potential.

One of the great myths about rural Australia is that communities are struggling because they are somehow lacking.

Lacking population.

Lacking infrastructure.

Lacking services.

Lacking resources.

Lacking opportunity.

...let's be honest -

Many communities do face significant challenges.

Access to housing.

Workforce shortages.

Service access.

Climate impacts.

Digital connectivity.

Cost of living pressures.

Population change.

...They're real challenges.

But after more than a decade at FRRR, I've reached a different conclusion.

The greatest challenge facing many rural communities isn't a lack of potential.

It's that the potential already there often goes unseen, unsupported or underestimated.

At FRRR, we see extraordinary examples of local leadership every day.

People establishing services where none existed.

Volunteers creating opportunities for young people.

Communities restoring buildings, creating enterprises and revitalising public spaces.

People finding solutions - despite limited resources.

Again and again, what we see is not a lack of capability.

We see capability waiting to be unlocked.

Which leads me to what I think is rural Australia's greatest superpower.

I don't think our greatest asset is our land.

Or our minerals.

Or our tourism destinations.

Or even our resilience.

I think our greatest superpower is relationships.

The ability to connect.

To collaborate.

To organise.

To adapt.

To rally around a challenge.

To support each other.

In cities, people often rely heavily on systems.

In small towns, people rely on each other.

And that matters.

Because communities that know how to connect people and ideas can solve problems that no single government, funder or organisation could solve alone.

I've seen communities create childcare services.

Build community hubs.

Transform local economies.

Create tourism industries.

Launch social enterprises.

Develop community foundations.

Respond to disasters.

Attract investment.

Not because someone arrived with a master plan.

But because local people came together around a shared vision.

That is the superpower.

The future isn't something that happens to us.

Something else I've observed is that communities often talk about the future as though it arrives from somewhere else.

A government announcement.

A major employer.

A new industry.

A grant.

Or a big project.

And while those things can absolutely help, communities that thrive over the long term understand something different.

They understand that the future isn't something that happens to them.

It's something they actively shape.

It sounds like a small shift.

But it's incredibly powerful.

Because once a community sees itself as the author of its future rather than the recipient of it, the conversation changes.

People stop asking:

"What can we get?"

And start asking:

"What can we create?"

That's when reinvention begins.

At FRRR we've now distributed more than $200 million to 16,000 remote, rural and regional projects through partnerships, grants and community-led initiatives.

One lesson continues to emerge.

Money matters.

But money alone is rarely enough.

The projects that create lasting impact usually have something else behind them.

Strong leadership.

Trust.

Partnerships.

Vision.

Community ownership.

Confidence.

The most successful communities are not waiting for someone else to fix things.

They are bringing people together around a shared future.

And they are finding partners willing to back that ambition.

That's the role FRRR seeks to play.

We don't see ourselves as the heroes of the story.

Communities are.

We're simply one of the supporting players.

Our role is to help create conditions that allow communities to lead themselves.

Over the past couple of years, FRRR has undertaken extensive listening and reflection as we developed our new strategy.

The feedback was remarkably consistent.

Communities aren't asking to be rescued.

They're asking to be seen.

They're asking to be trusted.

They're asking for fair access to opportunity.

And they're asking for partners willing to stick with them for the long term.

That feedback has shaped our next chapter.

Rural and remote Australia is experiencing a period of major transition and adjustment – economic, generational, climate, and industrial. What we do now will have ripple effects for generations to come.

Our strategy is focussed on the next three years, and importantly, seeks to position and strengthen FRRR for what is needed of us in the next 25 years as an enduring partner to rural and remote communities.

The new strategy sharpens our focus on remote, very remote and underserved communities. It deepens our commitment to place-based investment, climate adaptation and resilience, support for future generations, and embeds First Nations partnership across our work. It also positions FRRR as more than a grantmaker. We want to be a connector, convener, advocate and trusted source of community intelligence.

Because increasingly we recognise that communities need more than funding.

They need access to networks.

Ideas.

Knowledge.

Influence.

Relationships.

Learning.

And people willing to take a long-term view.

Our strategy is designed around one simple belief.

The communities furthest from decision-making should be closer to opportunity.

One of the things I love about FRRR is that we make lots of small grants.

Sometimes only a few thousand dollars.

And occasionally people ask whether a small grant can really make a difference.

The answer is yes.

Not because of the money itself.

But because of what the money unlocks.

A small grant can give people confidence.

It can create momentum.

It can attract additional support.

It can bring people together.

We've consistently seen examples where funding acts as a catalyst rather than the sole driver of change, helping communities leverage additional investment, partnerships and capability. Small grants can help communities to shape and own their story.

The question isn't:

"How big is the grant?"

The question is:

"What becomes possible because someone believed in the idea?"

That's where transformation often starts.

One of the strongest examples of this philosophy is our Investing in Rural Community Futures program, or IRCF.

IRCF emerged from a simple question.

What if we stopped focusing only on projects?

What if we instead invested in the capability of communities themselves?

The leadership.

The relationships.

The organisations.

The collaboration.

The systems that sit behind successful communities.

That's exactly what IRCF does.

Communities come together to identify shared priorities.

They create a roadmap.

They receive local facilitation.

They access flexible funding.

They develop skills.

They build relationships.

And they learn together over several years.

What we've learned is fascinating.

The most important outcomes often aren't the projects.

They're the things that happen between the projects.

The partnerships.

The conversations.

The trust.

The confidence.

The willingness to think bigger.

Evidence from IRCF communities has shown strengthened collaboration, stronger partnerships, increased confidence and greater capability to advocate for their future.

One of the strongest findings from the independent evaluation was the emergence of hope.

In fact, the evaluators described a tangible sense of hope and confidence across participating communities, even after experiencing bushfires, floods and COVID.

Think about that for a moment.

Hope.

It's not something we often measure.

But maybe we should.

Because hope is often the foundation for action.

Hope creates energy.

it creates participation.

it creates momentum.

Hope helps people believe that change is possible.

And change becomes possible when communities believe they can shape the future.

One community highlighted in the IRCF evaluation was Junee in New South Wales.

What stands out isn't a single project.

It's what happened when a community started working from a shared roadmap and common agenda.

Local organisations strengthened their collaboration.

The conversation shifted from individual priorities to collective outcomes.

They saved their last bank from closure.

They improved health service coordination.

They built the sustainability and viability of the community owned aged care facility.

Relationships deepened.

Capability grew.

Momentum built.

And that's an important lesson.

The next chapter of any community will rarely be written by one organisation.

It will be written through many organisations choosing to work together.

Successful communities also tell themselves different stories.

Every town can point to problems.

And those problems are often real.

But thriving communities don't become trapped by deficit narratives.

Instead, they begin with strengths.

Their people.

Their heritage.

Their natural assets.

Their creativity.

Their relationships.

Their culture.

Their local pride.

And they ask:

"What can we build from here?"

The most successful towns don't copy another place.

They discover what is uniquely theirs.

And they amplify it.

Partnerships matter more than ever

No community can solve everything alone.

No council can.

No government can.

No philanthropy can.

No business can.

The future belongs to partnership.

Councils.

Community groups.

Businesses.

Traditional Owners.

Volunteers.

Foundations.

Governments.

Residents.

Everyone has something valuable to contribute.

The challenge is moving beyond simple transactions.

Towards genuine collaboration.

Shared goals.

Shared ownership.

Shared outcomes.

That's how systems change happens.

And that's how communities reinvent themselves.

As I finish today, I'd like to leave you with three invitations.

First, notice the superpowers already around you

Look beyond what's missing.

Who are the connectors?

The community builders?

The local champions?

The young leaders?

The quiet achievers?

What strengths already exist that you can build upon?

Second, invest in capability, not just projects

Projects are important.

But leadership lasts.

Relationships last.

Trust lasts.

Capability lasts.

Invest in the things that remain long after funding ends.

Third, be bold about the future

Most significant community transformations began as ideas that seemed slightly unrealistic.

A community enterprise.

A local foundation.

A revitalised main street.

A new service.

A new partnership.

A new vision.

Someone had the courage to ask:

"Why if and why not?"

As I prepared for today, I kept coming back to one question.

What will people say about your community ten years from now?

Will they say it was a place that waited?

Or a place that led?

A place that hoped someone else would solve the challenges?

Or a place that decided to shape its own future?

Because the communities that successfully reinvent themselves rarely start with more resources than everyone else.

They start with more imagination.

More collaboration.

More courage.

And a stronger belief that they can create something better together.

I remain profoundly optimistic about the future of rural Australia.

Not because the challenges are small.

They're not.

But because I keep meeting people like the people in this room.

People who care.

People who contribute.

People who lead.

People who build.

People who back their community.

The future of rural Australia won't be determined in Canberra, Brisbane or Melbourne.

It will be shaped in places like Longreach.

Around kitchen tables.

In community halls.

At council meetings.

On sporting fields.

In local businesses.

And in conversations between neighbours.

Because small towns really do have big futures.

And when we back the local power that's already there, extraordinary things become possible.

Thank you