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Identifying and Communicating Current Issues for Regional Australia

Abstract
The development of policy affecting regional Australia is dependent on a range of information that is collected at many levels. For regional communities to prosper it is important that issues of importance and relevance to regions be collected and considered in the decision making processes of planners and policy makers. This paper reports on an extensive study of regional Australian stakeholders consisting of considered experts, government, business and community members who contributed data via a community consultation process. The data was analysed and developed through a series of action research stages and categorised to identify six broad themes that propose directions for the future. The broad themes span governance, the economy, infrastructure, population and social issues, natural resource use management, and cultural and land rights issues. Each is discussed in detail and provide insights for future action that will promote a stronger Australia.

Keywords
Future issues, regional plans, regional policy

Cover Page Footnote
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Introduction

Understanding current issues affecting regional Australia is important for the development of sound policy and future planning for Australia as a whole. Much of regional Australia comprises rural and remote areas that are vast and sparsely populated, yet these regions create significant wealth for the country. This creates a unique situation where decision making for considerable numbers of the people is made in concentrated areas far removed from where issues arise, and policy decisions and programs may be implemented. Yet for one-third of the population living outside major urban areas, the impact of centrally made decisions can have significant implications for social, economic and environmental factors affecting their communities with flow on effects across Australia. Regional communities are also often more aware of potential unintended consequences of policy decisions at the implementation stage, increasing the importance of regional consultation. Concern for the lack of coherent and integrated policy processes relating to regional Australia has existed for some time (Prasser, Cockfield and Waterman, 2006). There is also recognition that regions can and do deliver growth and greater prosperity for Australia (Australian Government, 2009). In 2009, regional Australia contributed 62 per cent of Australia's export income largely through mining and agriculture (Reserve Bank of Australia, 2010). Yet there are few opportunities for regional practitioners, business operators and government to come together to identify and discuss regional issues, or to develop and drive policy that will foster and develop regional areas in parallel to the development of cities. This paper reports on a series of conversations and meetings that provided a platform for professionals across regional Australia to discuss the strategic trends and directions for regional Australia.

What Defines Regional Australia?

In many respects the interests and aspirations of regional Australia are not dissimilar to the rest of Australia. Whilst cities and communities are often defined by size or similarity of interests, regional Australia is more often defined in terms of its qualities. Regional Australia is characterised by scale, substantial economic and landscape diversity and disparate communities with either an absence of common alliances or the absence of mechanisms to martial their commonalities. It is therefore hard for regional Australia to develop the critical mass or cohesive voice to have an impact on the national agenda.

None-the-less there are some aberrant observations to be made about regional Australia. To define regional Australia by population settlement it is worthwhile to note that 14 per cent of Australians live outside urbanised areas of the country (ABS, 2010). There are only 18 urban centres with populations over 100,000 (ABS, 2011). Eighty six per cent of Australia's land area is defined as remote, holding less than three per cent of Australia's population (Glover & Tennant, 2003). In order to define regional Australia by land ownership it is significant in policy terms to note that Indigenous Australians own, control, or have management arrangements over approximately 20 per cent of the Australian continent and this can be expected to continue to increase through native title determinations (Desert Knowledge Australia, 2008). Ecologically, vast amounts of regional Australia are also of high level biodiversity value (Australian Government, 2007).

Further characteristics unique to regional Australia making it vulnerable to the changes and challenges affecting sustainability and economic growth which may impact upon policy and planning include:

- The sudden and severe impacts of the global financial crisis on the world's economies and its consequential impacts on existing land use and economic activities including minerals and energy, agricultural and manufacturing industries;
- Climate change and associated impacts on water and energy availability and usage; agricultural practices; and, the impacts of government mitigation strategies;
- Social impacts associated with effects on employment availability, location and population mobility;
- Increasing contestability and conflict over land use.

These trends raise a range of significant policy and planning issues at national, regional and local community levels that impact on the sustainable economic development of regional Australia.

Identifying the Research Issues - The First Phase

Identifying and understanding the nature and extent of the range of issues above, particularly from the point of view of regional Australians, is of critical importance in developing policy and plans for the future. Identifying a process to collect, collate and synthesise a range of views on current issues for regional Australia was the focus of research reported in this paper. The objective was to consult widely with a range of experts from the community including government organisations who are involved in the implementation and planning of policy issues affecting regional Australia. Also of importance was the inclusion of the views of business leaders and officials from non-profit organisations.

The approach taken was based on action research (Stringer, 2007) and included an integration of expert opinion, broad community consultation and reflection. This blending of methods enabled a combination of inputs over a number of phases that built and commented on previous iterations of commentary. In doing so, perceptions could be clarified and refocused providing greater understanding and a depth of insight into the issues faced by rural communities.

In the first phase, experts from academia, government and business with interests and experience in regional policy were consulted to develop a list of issues they saw as being important to regional Australia. The participants were twelve representatives from the national steering committee of a regional conference and regional representatives from a forthcoming host centre location. Expert opinion is often used as a means of subject exploration for researchers (Malhotra et al., 2006). In the 1950s and 1960s, the Delphi Technique was popularised as a means for forecasting and the method has been adopted more broadly. The advantage of using experts is that it can access deep levels of knowledge and enable the exploration of complex and intertwined subjects that cross disciplinary boundaries (Grisham, 2009). In this study a modified version of the Delphi Technique was utilised to identify the key challenges

facing regional Australia. In addition, the range of issues, the impact of these issues and potential policy solutions were captured. A facilitator managed the process by organising the collection of ideas and discussion from the group. Following the discussion the group indicated the importance of each issue. A secondary purpose of the exercise was to identify criteria for informing policy choice analysis. These ideas were developed into a briefing paper to highlight issues that will be faced over the next 10 years at three levels: meta, mesa and micro. The briefing paper was circulated to all participants in the second phase of the research and this is discussed later in the paper. The issues and trends identified in the first phase for the three levels are outlined in the following sections.

National Issues

Although significantly less than some other countries around the world, the global financial crisis seriously impacted upon the Australian economy and more particularly, upon regional Australian economies. The narrower economic base of regional Australia, being largely dependent upon mining and agriculture, resulted in greater vulnerability due to its dependence on extended economies. These impacts have been immediate (BITRE, 2009).

Despite the impacts, Australia, as a whole, is weathering the economic times better than many countries. The challenge then is to ensure national, state and local policy frameworks and programs are put in place that: act to enable benefits to arise equally; address anticipated growth issues including providing and housing a skilled work-force, social and financial infrastructure; and, account for the often cyclical shifts in the economy.

At a Regional Level

The global economic downturn will test the resilience of local economies through declines in the economic capacity of individuals, business and the government's ability to respond to the service demands resulting from declines in income. The extent of the regional impacts will depend on three aspects of the regional economy. The first factor relates to the distribution of wealth, debt and investment. The second factor is the diversity of the regional economic base and the third factor is the flexibility and depth of the workforce capacity.

The geographical distribution of resources and populations in Australia with its highly urbanised coastal fringe and large tracts of sparsely settled, resource-rich interior creates a unique set of policy and planning conundrums in terms of:

- Equitable and accessible service delivery to all members of the community;
- Appropriate governance arrangements that efficiently and effectively maximise resource usage;
- Provision of infrastructure (transport, water, energy and telecommunications) in a timely manner;
- Appropriate labour force planning regarding education, training and flexible life long skill development;

- Ensuring all communities have equal opportunities to benefit from economic growth now and in the future;
- Identifying and developing sustainable, diverse business and employment opportunities for people in remote communities;
- Appropriate land and marine resource management.

The responsibility to act on these issues lies therefore with not just local key policy and program decision makers within elected government but also with the business community, the non-government sector and local communities including Indigenous and environmental groups.

Community Issues

Local communities have experienced very different impacts from both the economic crisis and climate change. Some communities have experienced major disruption and upheaval whilst others have been safe from many of the immediate impacts. Likewise, within communities, individuals may have experienced significant impacts whilst others have not. The impacts may have been made more severe if there was limited ability to influence outcomes.

However these realities must not overshadow the knowledge that entrepreneurship can be fostered; leadership and community engagement facilitated; regional pride nurtured and opportunities seized. Essential to moving forward is a vision for growth.

Responses to the Research Agenda - The Second Phase

The second phase of the research process involved the collection of feedback from key informants who had been identified by the researchers as holding particular expertise on regional issues or attended a national conference with a focus on regional Australian issues. Based on a briefing paper developed as an output from the discussions in phase one, an online survey containing fixed and open-ended questions was mailed to 2,138 potential respondents. A response was received from 388 people providing an effective response rate of 18 per cent. The open-ended questions were analysed based on their content and arranged into themes (Yin, 2003) which were then interpreted by the researchers and an academic reference group. A number of key issues came into focus as a result of the process including:

1. **Urban push into rural areas:** The consequences of the increasing footprint of urbanisation driven by population growth and house block size were identified as an overarching theme which incorporated a number of other themes. These included the encroachment on open space and natural systems in the coastal zone and high value agricultural and inland horticultural areas as a result of sea change and tree change population movements. A further theme identified was the need for strategic decision making processes that will ensure consideration of sustainable economic development regarding appropriate land use activities across Australia. For example sustainable urban and infrastructure development that does no impact , agriculture, the development of special areas that are set

aside for aquaculture, recreation, defence, forestry and conservation and consideration of the impact of mining and tourism on regional areas.

2. **Responses to allocation and management of local natural resources:** With increasing and conflicting options determining land use there will be an increasing demand to respond to issues associated with on-site, off-site, cross-boundary and inter-jurisdictional impacts in regard to water, air, biodiversity and earth materials that give recognition to regional circumstances.

3. **Reduction in natural resources:** There is a need to assess and respond to anticipated decreases in intensive cropping and grazing capacity in line with water availability, viability of irrigation, community views on water diversions and dams, acidification, demand for reduced nutrient loads (and associated erosion issues) and chemical inputs into soil and waterways. This should include consideration of what sort of preparation needs to be made in anticipation of the impact of peak oil upon the mobility of goods and people.

4. **Governance:** Discussions relating to governance focused on the reform of Federalism in Australia. They identified the need to review current governance in regional Australia to ensure transparent models for ongoing effective delivery of 'citizenship services'. These were viewed as extending outside the existing paradigms of service delivery, such as schools, police and health, and give recognition to the wealth of regional Australia. Views were expressed highlighting the need for government to maintain a profile alongside market related activities rather than having communities rely wholly on services provided by mining operators.

5. **Economic opportunities for Indigenous populations:** Indigenous Australians have a very particular relationship with land that should influence government land use planning and business decision making. Alternative accountable mechanisms need to be developed that recognise this relationship and create institutionally supported processes regarding governance. Additionally, access to further government support and business services to assist Indigenous economic business development is required.

6. **Recognition for regional Australia:** Regional Australia should play a greater role in the broader development of Australian social and political culture into the next decade, to ensure the economic and strategic importance of a regional Australia is recognised.

7. **Need for local leadership:** Respondents highlighted the need for local leadership and the danger for regions and communities relying too heavily on government for the development and implementation of responses to challenges facing regional areas. Regional and remote Australia often looks to governments to provide leadership in – or at least coordination of – responses to pressing issues. But the Australian and State/Territory governments are primarily geared to be responsive to city constituencies. Political priorities are inevitably focused on the larger populations of the cities and the inner regional areas. While there is on-going dialogue about the need for governments to reconsider their approach to regional/remote Australia (for example, the remote FOCUS initiative, see

Huigen, 2008) regional and community responses are also vital to develop long-term approaches to address regional issues in a systemic and systematic way.

The response to these issues therefore must rest with not just local key policy and program decision makers within elected government but also with the business community, the non-government sector and local communities including Indigenous and environmental groups.

A Fundamental Change is Required

These issues confront some of the fundamental ways in which regional development, policy frameworks, approaches and implementation instruments are developed and practiced. The effect of the economic crisis and a region's capacity to respond to change act both independently, and in combination to require consideration for alternative approaches to policy.

The economic crisis can act as a catalyst for change. The ways in which communities and regions respond to these challenges may distinguish which regions will be able to batten down, draw upon lessons from the past, and seek new opportunities or reinvent themselves to maximise opportunities into the future and the next growth stage.

Regional capacity to respond proactively to change is embedded in a rich 'bush tradition' of innovation and responsivity to challenges, however, now, more than ever, these challenges must be met with strong, interrelated and sustainable frameworks that work within regions and articulate across regions.

These issues combine to demand recognition that regional Australia has specific and unique characteristics and qualities that need to be considered outside the policy frameworks that are commonly applied to densely populated areas. Typically, regional agendas are focused on sectoral interests and economic and business considerations. However it is harder for existing frameworks to be adapted to government-business relations in regions which may not be based on market-based approaches.

Focussing on the Future – The Third Phase

The issues collated through the first two phases then formed the basis for round-table discussions at a regional summit and a national conference summit held in the City of Kalgoorlie-Boulder in 2009. These discussions formed the third phase of the process. In this process communities of interest were developed and formed into working groups based on their interests, to identify recommendations and proposed actions for the future.

The concept of a community has its roots in sociology and was defined by Hillery (1955, p.118) as "persons in social interaction within a geographic area and having one or more additional ties." While there has been considerable discussion of the definition of the term, the focus in this study was that participants held a common

interest. The common ties in this case therefore were the interest in the topic, and the conference venue created an additional tie to the forum.

Much of the discussion centred on the need to focus on and confront some of the fundamental ways in which regional development, policy frameworks, approaches and implementation instruments are developed and practiced.

Regional capacity to respond proactively to change is embedded in a rich 'bush tradition' of innovation and responsivity to challenges. This 'can do' attitude again was evident at the summit with an abundance of case studies and shared experiences demonstrating Australia's rich frontier culture and history. However there was a clear sense that, now more than ever, these challenges needed strong, interrelated and sustainable frameworks that work within regions and articulate across regions.

Key points summarised from the discussions included:

1. The need to ensure a voice for regional Australia – including appropriate legislative, planning and implementation mechanisms to maximise potential for growth and benefits in the resource sector to remain in regional communities;
2. Planned decentralisation as an effective response to over urbanisation, peak oil, and the negative social and economic impacts of fly-in and fly-out (or drive-in and drive-out employment);
3. Industry, government and communities working together in whole-of-life planning;
4. Growing Indigenous Australian's capacity for economic development;
5. Provision of infrastructure in a strategic and co-ordinated way that creates connectivity for regional Australia and not corridors through regional Australia;
6. Remoteness, population distribution, and the challenge of governance in Northern Australia;
7. Climate Change Responses – especially carbon trading emissions, regional mitigation strategies, food and water security and the need to seize the opportunities of the 'Green Industrial Revolution'; and
8. Increased access to professional development opportunities for practitioners in regional Australia.

Future Actions – The Final Phase

In order to take the discussions forward, and as part of a productive community consultation process, the ideas emerging from the comments, suggestions, discussions and contributions collected over approximately 12 months were summarised and disseminated to government departments and decision makers. This was done in order to provide feedback and understanding for future decisions that will impact upon residents of regional areas in Australia. This method forms part of an agreed two-way process of information exchange between government agencies and the community, which is an obligation of decision makers in public office (Christie, 2008).

The following propositions were drawn from presentations, the pre-conference survey, panel discussions, forums and informal network discussions conducted during the study. They have been grouped around six themes as follows:

1. Governance
2. Economic
3. Infrastructure
4. Population and Social
5. Natural Resource Use Management
6. Cultural and Land Rights

Governance Propositions

Participants indicated they sought actions to deliver key linkages and capacities both between and across regional Australia. They sought principles and actions that would ensure public, private, social and economic balance and identified complexity, uncertainty, change and fragmentation as key issues that the community faced. These issues are summarised in the following specific proposals:

- Acknowledge the need for a common alliance throughout regional Australia and mechanisms to martial their commonalities. For example, 'giving recognition to the voice of regional Australia';
- Establish mechanisms for managing the increasingly difficult choices between environment, community and industry. For example, the inherent contradictions that are created with projects such as the Kimberly LNG Precinct[1];
- Identify regional stakeholders to advocate with the State and Federal government for viable regional communities with regards to: decentralisation, the commitment and clarity of resourcing, and transparency;
- Recognise the need for strong, interrelated and sustainable frameworks that work within regions and articulate across regions; and
- Assist industry and community to work in collaboration with all levels of Government to develop a shared vision and strategy to achieve increases in Indigenous employment participation and ensure the sustainability of towns in rural areas.

Economic Propositions

There was a general call for actions to develop a strong, growing and diversified regional economy that gives recognition to environmental considerations. Following are specific proposals related to the economic theme.

- At the broadest level to initiate appropriate and enabling policy and institutional settings to facilitate regional development;
- Foster returning 'royalties to the region' as a targeted regional development funding mechanism;
- Encourage commercial entities in the resource sector to invest in regions where they operate;

[1] The WA State Government has pursued a $100 million Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) precinct in the Kimberly region just north of Broome despite calls from local residents for sustainable development and protection of the unique environment and cultural heritage of the area.

- Initiate 'whole-of-mine-life' planning to encompass cyclic impacts of large mineral resources development projects. This planning should assist to reduce long infrastructure and approval times, sudden mine closures and/or down-sizing, and the location and provision of amenities and workforce accommodation;
- Recognise that typically, large initial infrastructure expenditures are made on non-relocatable assets with efficient capacity utilisation and financial returns taking years or decades;
- Recognise that many of the properties of infrastructure development are contrary to those often assumed in economic and finance systems. Consideration should also be made of their impact on the environment, society and the residents;
- Argue that it is time for the full nature of infrastructure investment to be recognised and accommodated in funding and taxation regimes;
- Enable industry and community to work in collaboration with all levels of Government to develop a shared vision and strategy in order to improve Indigenous employment and the sustainability of rural towns.;
- Support and endorse accredited ecotourism initiatives and enterprises;
- Foster greater application of research and development in areas including regional Australian monetary policy;
- Support an immediate review of the current system of Commonwealth Grants Commission in order to emphasise the importance of horizontal equity whilst addressing disparities in access to services between regions with States;
- Recommend the Australian Government urgently address the current fringe benefit tax settings that reward fly-in fly-out workers and penalise the provision of housing for resident workers and their families;
- Encourage greater development of mine services in regions by way of education, housing and retail industry so as to be active disincentives for fly-in fly-out and drive-in drive-out employment; and
- Encourage funding of research and development for value adding industry, especially in mining and agriculture.

Infrastructure Propositions

In order to provide social and economic development the need to develop infrastructure to provide connectivity between regions, rather than corridors through regions, was identified as a key action required of policy makers. This not only covered hard but also soft infrastructure as highlighted below:

- Support strategic placement and access to soft infrastructure and services including establishing multi-user infrastructure;
- Initiate strategies to secure water reform. State-wide demand for water in the minerals and energy sector has been projected to grow at a compound annual growth rate of 5.4 per cent to 2020, increasing the need for effective water reform strategies (The Chamber of Minerals and Energy of WA, 2010);
- Install information technology and communication platforms, and transport routes for global connectedness and competitiveness; and
- Encourage patent capital and long term finance.

Population and Social Propositions

Population policy emerged as an important issue facing regional Australia. In addition, the need for community consultation with regards to issues affecting regional areas such as population policy was also an emerging theme. The recommendations highlighted are as follows:

- Develop policies which encourage and support Indigenous Australians to engage in positive and proactive leadership and ensure frameworks act to: enable benefits be available to all; address anticipated development, including providing housing for a skilled work force; providing social and financial infrastructure; and, accounting for the often cyclical shifts in the economy;
- Conduct research to evaluate benchmarks for equitable and accessible service delivery to all members of the community;
- Initiate appropriate labour force planning regarding education, training and flexible life-long skill development in communities;
- Review policies to ensure they facilitate equal opportunities and benefits to all communities from economic growth now and in the future;
- Conduct research to identify and develop sustainable, diverse business and employment opportunities for people in remote communities;
- Foster entrepreneurship and leadership in local communities; facilitate community engagement; and encourage regional pride.
- In collaboration with regional stakeholders develop a future vision for regional areas.
- Establish relationships with the executive level policy-makers of community based organisations and peak industry organisations;
- Support the establishment of regional peak bodies to coordinate and assist not-for-profit organisations in satisfying multi-agency funding applications and compliance standards;
- Liaise with community-based organisations to mobilise existing and new residents in the 25-64 years age ranges to contribute to the community through employment or volunteer activities;
- Initiate and support further research into indicators showing substantial support for flexible, highly mobile accommodation solutions for mine workers and their families.

Natural Resource Use Management Proposals

An appreciation of Australia's natural resources is evident among regional communities and many comments highlighted the need to maintain and enhance the international competitiveness of our regions in an environmentally sound manner.

- Support policy development and foster institutional arrangements to effectively address natural resource management issues including water security and biodiversity conservation;
- Foster the self-sustaining management of resources;
- Improve the management of all land users' environmental footprint;
- Support 'one-stop shop' approval processes for resource development;

- Encourage research and development investment in water efficiency as an increasingly important area of societal concern;
- Increased research and development into renewable energies and reduced energy uses;
- Lower the footprint and impact of agricultural practices by encouraging appropriate scale;
- Foster drought tolerant cropping; and
- Encourage greater forward planning and collaboration between industry bodies and between industry and government.

Cultural and Land Rights Propositions

There was a call for action to address heritage issues and the potential for developing "broader settlements" under the Native Title Act as evident in the following recommendations:

- Foster the development and implementation of mechanisms to appropriately assist Indigenous society adjust to the mainstream global economy;
- Recognise that for many Indigenous Australians their economic development is limited by access to credit and/or capital and that this can often be compounded by low levels of literacy and numeracy or by living in a remote location;
- Acknowledge that many of the large infrastructure projects are occurring in locations where there are relatively large Indigenous populations that are characterised by low Indigenous employment;
- Optimise the opportunities for Indigenous groups and individuals to participate in major projects as sub-contractors, suppliers and as business owners (e.g. Queensland Indigenous Employment Policy was identified as an outstanding example);
- Improve the skills of local people, particularly Indigenous Australians prior to importing labour;
- Establish incentives to provide proactive training and employment for Indigenous Australians; and
- Call for fundamental changes to property rights for Indigenous Australians which are required in order to develop clear individual property rights in relation to homes and business, communal ownership and land held by native title. These measures will assist access to finance and other business development essentials.

Conclusion

This study, through an intensive process of action research that started with issue identification from experts, the collection and review of comments and feedback from a community of interest, and finally, reflection on the findings, identified six areas of action for government. They included governance, the economy, infrastructure, population and social issues, natural resource use management and cultural and land rights issues.

Alternative propositions arose from the six areas of action outlined above and include regional Australia acting to capitalise on new industries such as 'green industries', planning for decentralisation, particularly in regard to shifts from oil dependency and the development of human resource capacities at the local level. It was seen as important to create flexible, lifelong skilled human resources in, and for the regions. These should cover the ability to deliver goods and services in response to food and water security. Indigenous legal rights and land claims require resolution as a matter of high priority so that the role and capacity of Indigenous Australians in land and sea management are recognised and developed. It is also important to ensure appropriate legislative, planning and implementation mechanisms to maximise potential for growth and benefits from the resource sector for regional Australia. Finally, government needs to plan responses to the shifts in agricultural and other primary production activities as a result of climate change.

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