

PIA POSITION

The Australian settlement pattern is increasingly characterised by population concentrated in capital cities. This pattern of urbanisation has heightened the debate around the merits of different approaches to the development of regional Australia. Over the past 50 years capital cities and some regional centres have grown rapidly. At the same time, some parts of regional Australia have been in decline or have grown at much slower rates than the capital cities. In recent years, these disparities have arguably widened due to a number of social, economic and technological changes associated with globalisation.

The past two decades have witnessed a considerable shift in the both the objectives and content of regional policy. The process of globalisation has reconfigured many of the forces driving development in regional Australia, including new technologies, new production methods, new lifestyle preferences, and new business and investor location decisions.

The policy response from government has been receptive to these new drivers and reflects many of the recent 'breakthroughs' in regional development literature. Government has generally supported the view that regions should capitalise on their location-specific competitive advantages. In practice, this has meant developing region-specific policies, delivered through a bottom-up governance approach.

The role for planning however remains vague under this approach. This is compounded by the lack of a clear spatial framework to guide planning policies and actions, including economic and taxation policy, and provide certainty to both public and private investment across regional Australia.

The greater competitiveness of Australia on a global scale demands a stronger integration of all regions into the global economy. Resources and policy efforts should be guided by an overarching spatial strategy for each State and Territory. This strategy framework has a spatial orientation; however, it can be integrated with the strategic directions embedded in broader social and economic plans, as well as existing regional structure planning.

PIA calls for the following action to address regional development in Australia:

- **A well resourced program of research into the environmental, social and cultural drivers of population change and settlement patterns in regional areas.**
- **All levels of government to coordinate using a planning approach to regional development, based on state and regional spatial frameworks providing a hierarchical network of connected settlements, ensuring environmental sustainability and managing decline.**
- **The resourcing and empowerment of local communities to contribute to spatial frameworks.**

POLICY PRINCIPLES AND CONSIDERATIONS

1. State and Regional Spatial Frameworks for Australia

A State and Regional Spatial Framework for all Australian States would focus on broadly identifying a polycentric network of regions, major regional centres, and linked smaller towns and rural areas. This overarching strategy would provide a starting point for the development of more detailed and regional planning strategies for the identified regions in each of the States and Territories. Spatial frameworks must be linked to service delivery frameworks, including health, police, education and emergency services, to assist in delivering integrated and effective outcomes.

2. Stronger Regional Centres

Globalisation and centralisation have strengthened the position of larger regional centres and cities in relation to smaller communities. A network of strong regional centres in each State can provide centralised and accessible locations for social, health, economic and educational services and facilities for communities throughout regional Australia. Major social and community services and facilities should be consolidated in identified centres including regional arts and cultural centres, libraries and tertiary education facilities. Urban Growth Management tools such as urban growth boundaries and encouraging targeted increased urban density should be used to assist in achieving efficient urban form.

3. Networked Smaller Towns And Rural Areas

Smaller towns face considerable economic development challenges. Networks of smaller towns that are ‘tapped’ into the larger regional centres network through localised public transport services, improved road connections, and information and communication technologies should be created. Small towns will need to develop local economic development strategies that are responsive to local issues, such as population fluctuations due to mining and seasonal work, and are integrated with the nominated regional centres.

4. Capturing Population growth

The debate on population growth in Australia has highlighted the potential role that regional towns surrounding the major centres can play in accommodating this growth. Many stress that this is not a renewal of the decentralisation debate, but rather an acknowledgement that lifestyles outside of the major cities offer many benefits for families and older people. If employment and transport links can be achieved, then regional centres offer an attractive alternative to the continued sprawl of the bigger centres.

5. Infrastructure Development and Regional Connectivity

Infrastructure development and regional connectivity is integral to the economic development of regional Australia. An efficient transport system is a basic precondition for improving the

competitiveness of regions and for underpinning a polycentric spatial framework. A lack of basic infrastructure, transport connections and communications technologies will restrict economic development in regional and rural areas. Opportunities should be taken to develop a network of public paths, trails and public/community-based transport connecting regional centres with surrounding towns.

6. Amenity and Lifestyle Opportunities

A high level of amenity and liveability is crucial for attracting international and domestic tourists, and the human capital necessary to support a productive, sustainable and flexible regional economy. Both regional centres and small towns should pursue physical and non-physical strategies to develop distinctive and attractive built environments and opportunities that offer a high quality of life in coherent, integrated communities. Opportunities to encourage tourism based on the skills and experiences of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples should be encouraged.

7. Social and Cultural Programs

Spatial policies need to integrate with broader social and cultural initiatives and programs to enhance quality of life and opportunity for communities in regional areas. Regional centres should pursue cultural and community programs to support the growth of social justice, equity of access and local cultures. The needs and aspirations of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples must be an integral part of programs to address issues including health and education.

8. Environmental Sustainability

Two aspects of sustainability are critical to the future of regions. The first is ensuring regions are 'future-proofed' against the impacts of climate change, including the fiscal impacts of climate change policies such as carbon pollution reduction schemes (i.e. the costs of transition), and adapting to a changed climate, including more extreme weather events. The second is the opportunity to pursue economic development strategies focused around the sustainable economy, including renewable energies such as wind and solar, food security initiatives and eco-tourism.

9. Managing Decline

Despite some projections for Australia's population growth to reach 39 million by the middle of this century, in some parts of regional Australia decline may be inevitable. In the long-term, a sustainable future for some regions in Australia might mean that areas are assisted in their inevitable decline given long run economic forces and environmental imperatives that provide an insurmountable hurdle. In the event of continued decline in small towns, plans should be prepared to manage the negative impacts of decline. This should include tangible assistance for people to relocate and appropriate counselling. Strategies for managing decline should be incorporated into new and existing regional plans.

10. Implementation

These strategies cannot be unilaterally imposed by central governments and will need to be developed locally through strong local leadership and formalised partnerships. Leadership is a key driver of economic performance and is especially important in smaller communities, which often lack infrastructure, skills and resources for local economic development. Local enterprise is often stifled by lack of control over local affairs. Participation would be greater if decisions affecting local people were made by locals familiar with the circumstances and priorities of their local community. Governments should ensure local leaders are supported and nurtured. Government incentives to encourage people to live and do business in regional areas should also be considered, including taxation policies such as remote living allowances.

PIA ACTION

PIA will promote:

- to governments a planning approach to regional development based on state and regional spatial strategic planning frameworks providing a hierarchical network of connected settlements, ensuring environmental sustainability and managing both growth and decline;
- identifying ways and means of resourcing and empowering local communities within this framework;
- research into the environmental, social and cultural drivers of population change and settlement patterns in regional areas
- the role of planners and the planning system in framing positive actions to achieve rational regional strategies.

THIS POSITION STATEMENT DERIVES FROM

Future Directions for Regional NSW, prepared by SGS Economics and Planning, Sept 2008

PIA Policy Statement, Liveable Communities, Feb 2006