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The Australian Rangeland Society

Decentralisation in Regional Australia: What does it really mean?

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Abstract

Amidst change and decline of regional, rural and remote (RRR) communities globally, policy makers have struggled to agree on the nature of policy settings to sustain such communities. In Australia too, regional development policy has long been highly problematic for policy makers (of whatever political persuasion). Various approaches have been tried over the past 100 years with very limited success in driving sustainable economic growth in RRR Australia. As a result, a high level of political risk has come to be associated with regional policy initiatives aimed at redressing decline or promoting socio-economic growth. This in itself, has become an important driver in determining policy approaches to RRR Australia. Australia has tended to look externally for 'tried and true' approaches to regional development as a means of mitigating this risk. For the most part, such approaches have come from the experiences of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries.

Increasingly, there is a policy trend across OECD countries towards more decentralised, 'localist' approaches to regional development. The expectation is that regions will mobilise local assets and resources with a view to capitalising on specific, localised competitive advantages. Such policies can be seen for example in the European Union Commission's policy stance on smart, sustainable and inclusive economies. Australia has also largely followed this path. The challenge for Australia in adopting such approaches however, is that they are usually not nuanced in terms of our demography, geography, history of settlement patterns or economic base.

A further challenge lies in how the concept of 'decentralisation' itself is understood and subsequently mobilised as policy. For example, recent focus at the national scale has centred on the notion of moving government departments to regional Australia, and this is being termed 'decentralisation.' One could argue that this is a concerted and genuine effort to promote regional growth, by devolving the bureaucracy of government to regional areas where local conditions are better understood and thus decision-making could be more effective. Conversely, a counter argument could be made that 'localism' 'decentralisation' and the like, are simply a mechanism through which political risk can be effectively devolved and thus managed. Put succinctly, if local people, acting in a representative fashion, make their own strategic decisions, then the responsibility for the success or failure of such decisions and strategy outcomes stops with them.

The major question to be asked then, is whether what we are seeing in the current regional policy rhetoric is a form of 'top down' regionalism, driven by the State for political purpose, or whether it is a fuller, more inclusive form of regionalisation, aimed at benefitting regions. Importantly, how will we know the difference?

This presentation will examine the concept of 'decentralisation' in the context of both 'regionalism' and 'regionalisation' and discuss the reality of both approaches and what this means for RRR Australia.