THE ESTABLISHMENT OF REGIONAL DEVELOPMENT AUSTRALIA COMMITTEES IN AUSTRALIA: ISSUES AND INITIATIVES FOR THE FUTURE

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ABSTRACT: The Australian federal government's approach to regional development since the 2010 election has seen more emphasis placed on local empowerment and leadership. The government has indicated that the 55 Regional Development Australia (RDA) Committees are expected to provide leadership and facilitate the process of local decision making. This expectation would require substantial changes in the operational scope, responsibilities and power of RDAs. It is proposed that successful leadership in regional development requires a collaborative approach. In order to provide effective collaborative leadership, RDAs will need to have a clear view of what they are required to do as well as position themselves to undertake their activities in a collaborative manner. This paper presents an overview of the challenges and issues confronting RDAs in October 2010 as perceived by RDA staff and committee members. It is apparent representatives believed that RDAs had struggled to come to terms with their role and consequently they had been unable to establish authority with government departments, other regional development organisations and the community. A lack of adequate funding had also prevented RDAs from undertaking many of their intended activities. These challenges need to be addressed in order for RDAs to provide effective leadership and meet government expectations.

KEY WORDS: Regional policy, regional development, regional planning, Regional Development Australia (RDA).

1. INTRODUCTION

The 2010 Federal election in Australia, which saw two rural independents holding the balance of power, resulted in a substantial refocusing on regionalism and regional development. The newly elected Labor Government's agreement with the two rural independents included an announcement of a $10 billion expenditure program for regional Australia. This commitment aimed to deliver better services, infrastructure and opportunities for economic development in regional Australia.

A major feature of this new commitment was the assurance by the government that it would substantially increase the operational scope, responsibilities and power of the existing 55 Regional Development Australia (RDA) Committees. The government implied that it expected RDAs would be pivotal in ensuring local empowerment and decision-making by providing collaborative leadership. It was also implied by government that there would be recognition of RDAs throughout the three levels (Local, State/Territory and Federal) of government. Simon Crean, the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government anticipated that the RDAs would engage with stakeholders; undertake strategic planning; be innovative; develop local knowledge; and link portfolios (Crean, 2010c).

It would seem regions that are able to generate collaborative leadership and reach a consensus on a future vision and the strategies needed would be better placed to influence government policy and secure funding (see Crean, 2010a). Achieving a consensus amongst a range of regional stakeholders requires a substantial degree of coordination and cooperation since there are a number of regional development agencies that are supported by all levels of government (Beer and Maude, 1997).

In order for RDAs to become effective collaborative leaders and achieve government expectations they require both a clear understanding of their new role and the financial and human resources to enable them to undertake appropriate activities.

It is the aim of this paper to examine the challenges and issues confronting RDAs in late-2010, as perceived by RDA staff and committee members, and to determine how these issues may impact upon the ability of RDAs to provide effective collaborative leadership in promoting regional development.

The paper begins with a brief overview of regional development in Australia and the role of leadership in achieving development. This is

followed by a description of the development of the RDAs since their establishment. The next section describes the workshop followed by an summary of the findings. The paper concludes with a discussion and conclusion.

Regional Development in Australia

While the meaning of regional development and its governance in Australia are not clearly articulated (Conway et al., 2011) it is clear that a region's development will be influenced by various endogenous and exogenous factors including natural resource endowments, human and financial capital, infrastructure, markets, industry diversification, leadership, local institutional capacity, and entrepreneurial activity. The objective of regional development has been to utilise these factors in the most efficient manner to maximise on-going (sustainable) benefits for regions and their populations.

Planning for and achieving sustainable regional development is a considerable challenge on any spatial scale - be it global, national, state, regional or local - in the existing context of increasing globalisation, a rapidly growing global population, the recent global financial crises as well as the threats associated with climate change (Blanch, 2008; Stone, 2003; Wilkinson et al., 2001). The general perspective is that regional Australia has been seen as particularly vulnerable to the impacts of globalisation (Rainnie and Grant, 2005) and that regions must increase their economic resilience through long term strategic planning. According to the Bureau of Infrastructure, Transport and Regional Economics (BITRE) (2009) the pursuit of resilience establishes regional economic development as a top agenda item.

The need for strategic planning and a coherent national framework in regional development contrasts with the fractured policy approach that has existed in Australia. In the regional development space the three levels of government – Federal, State/Territory and Local – have often adopted differing, and sometimes contradictory, approaches (Conway et al., 2011; Morrison *et al.*, 2004). In addition, regional development initiatives have been inadequately funded, erratically pursued and have lacked a coherent national framework (Beer, 2000). Therefore it is not surprising that results of the initiatives have been highly variable (Conway et al., 2011). In addition, the diverse nature of regions has made it difficult for governments to provide effective 'one size fits all'

solutions since most solutions need to be regionally specific (Woodhill, 1996). Gray and Lawrence (2001) suggest that where there have been 'top-down' government policy responses, with little input from local communities, the result has often been urban-centric policy responses that have not been appropriate in a regional setting.

Currently Australian regional development policy is underpinned by neo-liberal philosophies that have been generally accepted by recent governments (Kelly *et al.*, 2009). According to Beer *et al.*, (2003) neo-liberal policies emphasise self-help, and encourage regional solutions to problems while privileging economic interests at the regional level. Under these policies the role of government is to steer the course of regional development rather than undertaking the 'rowing'.

The steering approach requires a 'bottom-up' process, often referred to as 'regionalism'. Regionalism is seen as an improvement on the 'old' interventionist approach involving a 'top-down' administrative/technical process, referred to as 'regionalisation' (Morrison and Lane, 2006). The top-down focus was concerned with attracting industry and capital to a region from elsewhere through the promotion of a region's competitive advantages. There was a belief that this top-down approach would result in economic growth through the 'trickle-down' affect. However, it has become increasingly apparent that "sustainable development strategies should favour bottom-up over top-down approaches; redistribution over 'trickle-down', self-reliance over dependence; … and small-scale projects rather than grand-scale or megaprojects" (Roseland, 2000, p. 105). This bottom-up or regionalism approach requires a local rather than a regional, state, national, or international focus (Roseland, 2000). This position aligns closely with Simon Crean's belief that local people are best placed to make decisions about their regional economy (Crean, 2010a).

The bottom-up approach promotes community empowerment (Eversole, 2003) and the development of local rural industries, based on local resources and closely tied to the local community (see Eversole and Martin, 2005). This type of approach also requires that decision-making and interaction takes place at the local level, within the influence of a local community's social and cultural norms (Eversole and Martin, 2005). In this environment local leadership becomes very important.

The role of leadership in regional development

A number of authors have identified the importance of leadership in regional development (for example, Stimson et al., 2005; Sotarauta, 2010;

Horlings and Padt, 2011; Harmaakorpi and Niukkanen, 2007; Collinge and Gibney, 2010). Stimson et al. (2005, p. 23) suggest that sustainable development in a region is achieved through a "virtuous circle … whereby proactive and strong leadership and effective institutions enhance the capacity and capability of a place to better use its resource endowments and gain improved market fit in becoming competitive and being entrepreneurial". They assert it is leadership and institutional factors that underpin regional development. In fact, they argue that leadership will facilitate institutional change that will, in turn, enable regional economies to adapt to and meet the demands of a changing environment.

Traditionally, leadership has been seen as a hierarchical relationship between a 'leader' and 'followers' however this type of leadership breaks down in a collaborative context (Morse, 2010). Therefore in a setting where power is increasingly being dispersed with greater dependence on collaboration and collective processes an alternative form of leadership is required. In a regional economic development context improved economic performance requires leadership that involves the institutional actors taking collaborative action across various sectors. As Stimson et al. (2005, p. 30) note "(C)ollaboration is not just desirable; it is crucial".

Clearly successful collaborative regional leadership[1] should reinforce networks and cooperation amongst regional/local actors as well with the actors external to the region. Harmaakorpi and Niukkanen (2007, p.91) suggest that many independent regional actors from "both international and national levels, as well as from the regional level" need to participate in the process and that "no single organisation can assume sovereign leadership over other actors".

Hoppe and Reinelt (2010) define these types of leadership networks as 'collective leadership networks'. They also suggest that increasingly the focus of leadership development is on nurturing and catalysing leadership networks "especially those that seek to develop leadership with a capacity to influence policy and bring about social and systems change" (Hoppe and Reinelt, 2010, p.600). A collective leadership network is "(A) self-organized system of social ties among people attracted to a common cause or focused on a shared goal. Network members exercise leadership locally. As the number of local groupings grows and there is increasing

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[1] Collaborative leadership is also labelled as integrative public leadership, network leadership and inter-organisational leadership – see Sun and Anderson (2011)

interaction, these groups begin to align and connect to form larger networks. These networks are often rooted in a sense of community and purpose; they may be driven by a desire to achieve a specific goal, or simply by the desire of each member to belong to something larger than oneself" (Hoppe and Reinelt, 2010, p.600). The fusion of different perspectives and ideas into one common goal or desired outcome helps to facilitate the alignment of the different elements of collaboration (Morse, 2010; Hopppe and Reinart, 2010).

Collaborative leadership needs to based on mutual trust and cooperation and can be enacted through formal and informal processes including committees, workshops, seminars, and e-mail (Morse, 2010).

A major issue for collaborative regional leadership is to overcome what Morrison and Lane (2003) describe as the constant danger of regional bodies becoming parochial in their management strategies and priorities. As Conway et al. (2011, p. 8) note "Australian and international evidence shows that participation in regional development is dominated by vested interests and large scale capital … with little room for those groups considered subaltern". The ability to break down parochialism is also hampered by the process of state and federal funding that enables government and government departments to have substantial control on programs enacted at the local level (Conway et al., 2011). While policy remains in centralised departments, Beer et al., (2005) maintain that government is reluctant to devolve decision-making responsibility to the regions.

In summary, collaborative leadership can help break down parochialism. It requires a repositioning from a hierarchical leadership process to one of assisting diverse groups to create "shared goals that motivate and inspire shared work to achieve them" (Morse, 2010, p.244). In this leadership process there are a range of organisations where each organisation has no formal authority over any other organisation (Sun and Anderson, 2011, p.1). Despite the lack of formal authority in these networks, Mehra et al. (2006) contend that leadership will tend to be relatively centralised and that only a few (or even one) emerge as leaders within a group at any point in time. In these situations it is usually those that can undertake action who become the lead organisation. It is this lead organisation that often provides the most resources for collaboration (Morse, 2010). In addition, a lead organisation in a regional development setting must demonstrate the necessary political skills to form stable external and internal coalitions (Stimison et al., 2005) and the capacity to create stable and durable mechanisms and alliances allowing for "the

identification of a range of micro-level skills and macro-level resources that can generate capacity" (Stimson et al., 2005, p. 44).

As noted earlier the government is expecting RDA Committees to take a leading collaborative role in facilitating a process of local decision making while working effectively with the three levels of government and other stakeholders (see Crean, 2010b). However in order to do this the RDA Committees will need appropriate funding and capacity as well as being able to demonstrate legitimacy and relevance to other regional stakeholders.

RDAs and their place in regional development

In 2008, the Rudd government, honouring its commitment to drive economic prosperity, sought to transition the *Area Consultative Committees* (ACCs) to become local RDA Committees. The RDA network was to build on the success of ACCs and to take on a broader role to develop strategic input into national programs to improve coordination of regional development initiatives and ensure effective engagement with local communities (RDA, 2008). Fifty five RDA Committees were established throughout Australia.

The RDA Charter states that it forms a partnership between the "Australian, state, territory and local governments to develop and strengthen the regional communities of Australia. It will have a pivotal role in ensuring the long-term sustainability of Australia's regions" (RDA, 2009a). A key focus for RDAs is the economic, social and environmental issues affecting regional communities. The activities for RDAs include the development of regional business growth plans and strategies, the provision of environmental solutions to support sustainability and the development of strategies to ensure social inclusion within regional communities. This mandate was to be achieved through consultation with the community to articulate local priorities, to promote and disseminate information on policy initiatives and to act as a conduit between governments and regional communities (RDA, 2009a).

Since the RDAs are a collaborative partnership between the federal government, the state and territory governments and local government, their structure varies between different states and territories. The differences in structures established for RDAs are supposed to reflect the needs of the different states and territories. The overriding National RDA

Charter and reporting framework was developed to maintain consistency of outcomes (RDA, 2009b).

Table 1 outlines the existing arrangements within each state and territory as set out in the Memoranda of Understanding between the Australian Government and each state and territory government (and the Local Government Associations in Tasmania and South Australia).

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Table 1. State and Territory RDA Models. Source: the Authors.

	Model	Funding	Appointment of Committees
NSW	Integration of the former Area Consultative Committees and NSW State Regional Development Boards into RDA committees (Incorporated Associations)	Joint funding between Federal and State Governments	Joint Federal and State Government Ministerial Appointments
VIC	Transition of ACC to RDA committees (Not Incorporated), supported and administered by Regional Development Victoria, under contract with the Australian Government	Joint funding between Federal and State Governments	Joint Federal and State Government Ministerial Appointments
Qld	Transition of ACC to RDA committees (Incorporated Associations)	Joint Federal and State Government funding with the Queensland Government making in-kind contribution	Joint Federal and State Government Ministerial Appointments
WA	Transition of ACC network to RDA network (Incorporated Associations). Parallel and collaborative arrangement between RDA and WA State Regional Development Commissions	Solely funded by Australian Government	Federal Government Ministerial Appointment
SA	Three parties to MOU (Australian Government, State Government and the Local Government Association) with integration of the former Area Consultative Committees and SA State Regional Development Boards into RDA committees (Incorporated Associations)	Tripartite funding by Federal, State and Local Governments	Joint Federal and State Government Ministerial and LGA President Appointments
TAS	Three parties to MOU (Australian Government, State Government and the Local Government Association) with transition of ACC into RDA Committee (Incorporated Association)	Joint Australian Government and State funding with the State Government making making-kind contribution	Federal Government Ministerial Appointment
ACT	Integration of the former Capital Region Area Consultative Committee and the Capital Regional Development Board into RDA Committee (Incorporated Association)	Joint Federal and Territory Government funding	Joint Federal and Territory Government Ministerial Appointments
NT	Transition of ACC to RDA Committee (Incorporated Association)	Joint Federal and Territory Government funding with the Northern Territory Government making an in-kind contribution	Federal Government Ministerial Appointment

Given the relatively recent establishment of the RDAs and government expectations that they will provide collaborative leadership in regions, it is appropriate to consider RDAs perceptions of their emergent role as well as the challenges they face and opportunities that exist to allow them to maximise their effectiveness and their contribution to regional development.

Concept for workshop

The concept for the RDA workshop arose from discussions between the authors and various RDA staff and committee members who expressed a need for a forum where RDA stakeholders could discuss shared issues/concerns. The agenda for this workshop was heavily informed by a number of sources, including a March 2010 meeting of RDA Chairs, a June 2010 meeting of RDA CEOs, the establishment of RDA priorities for 2010-2011 and a survey of RDA members undertaken by the authors prior to the workshop.

A survey was emailed out to the 55 RDAs in early June requesting information about their preferences for the format of the proposed workshop, suggestions of possible presenters and the themes/issues RDA representatives wanted covered at the workshop. Forty per cent of RDA representatives responded to the survey. The survey results suggested that RDA members had a keen interest in discussing processes for regional plans they were required to design and that were to be considered and funded by the federal government; how to integrate local, state and federal aspirations into their regional plans and their activities and priorities; and how to gain a clearer understanding of federal government expectations of RDA Committees and therefore a clear understanding of their role. The RDA representatives who responded to the survey articulated a desire to discuss government expectations of the RDA model of regional development. It was also notable that the representatives proposed knowledge-based topics, such as achieving social inclusion and engaging with community and government, rather than skills-based ones.

It is important to note that the planning for the workshop was undertaken prior to the Federal election. It was clear at the workshop that there was an expectation amongst RDA representatives that their operating environment had changed substantially since the election and that the position of the RDAs had improved considerably.

The Workshop

As a result of the consultation with relevant stakeholders the following objectives were determined for the workshop. These were to:
1. Facilitate collaboration between RDAs;
2. Identify and address some of the priority issues for RDAs based on the implementation of their regional plans and prescribed roles and responsibilities;
3. Provide alternative perspectives on regional development;
4. Develop strategies that allow the RDAs to engage with communities;
5. Provide mechanisms and strategies for effectively implementing RDA regional plans.

Fifty-six people attended the workshops from around Australia. Understandably, given the location of the workshop, the most number of participants (25) came from Queensland. In addition, seven participants came from NSW, six from Victoria and Northern Territory, four from Western Australia and South Australia, and one from the ACT and Tasmania. Two government representatives completed the attendance list.

The format of the workshop consisted of four presentations in the morning session followed by an afternoon of group discussions involving all participants. The presentations, by industry and academic spokespersons, were on the topics of regionalism – diversity and its implications; social inclusion – reality and rhetoric; building strategic partnerships; and the Sunshine Coast Water Project.

The key topics for the afternoon group discussions included: moving the RDA brand forward; building cooperation and collaboration between RDAs; and RDA success – how to identify and measure achievements.

Most importantly, the group discussions provided participants with the opportunity to network and to identify and address shared issues within structured group discussions.

The outcomes of the discussions were recorded on butchers paper as well as notes taken by a scribe in each group. The researchers used the material from the butchers' paper and scribes notes to determine the outcomes from the group discussions. A draft summary of the findings was provided to the participants in order to ensure there was a correct

interpretation of the day's discussions. Once feedback was received the findings were finalised.

2. FINDINGS

A number of issues were identified by the RDA stakeholders and these were condensed into five broad areas of concern. These were the profile and impact of RDAs; a need for a clear communication and reporting structure; co-operation and collaboration between RDAs; resourcing; and multiple and competing agencies and activity. These are now discussed in greater detail.

Profile and impact of RDAs

Many participants noted both in the pre-workshop survey and at the workshop, that RDAs had experienced considerable difficulty in establishing their authority and credibility in regions and at all levels of government. It was felt that a lack of clarity about the role of the RDAs was a major reason for the lack of authority.

No-one is really clear about what we (RDAs) are supposed to be doing ...
I guess it is a transition period but it (the role of RDAs) needs to be
clarified sooner rather than later. (Participant # 45)

It appears that the Federal government's ideal is for RDAs is to have a
high level focus on policy, however there seems to be an element of
project focus ... this is probably due to the amalgamation of RDBs[2] and
ACCs which were project focussed. The RDAs have therefore inherited
ongoing projects and this is diverting their efforts from the intended
policy focus.
(Participant # 10)

Many of the RDAs also have Chairs, Deputy Chairs and/or Exec. Officers
that come from the previous RDBs and ACCs so perhaps they need to be
educated about the new role of RDAs.
(Participant # 31)

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[2] RDB refers to Regional Development Boards which were replaced along with the Area Consultative Committees (ACCs) to become Regional Development Australia (RDA).

But the minister asks the RDAs to engage with stakeholders and the community and all these motherhood statements, it's a talk fest with lots of navel – gazing and nothing substantial is likely to come from that.
(Participant # 2)

Many RDA representatives believed that a lack of clarity surrounding RDAs and their roles limited their ability to effectively engage with other organisations involved in regional development.

The _____ Council don't want to know about us. They can't see how we can help them at all.
(Participant # 48)

As a consequence of this lack of clarity about the role of RDAs a major priority for many RDA representatives was to get government to clearly identify the role and responsibilities of RDAs. It was argued that a transparent and effective statutory framework for RDAs would enable clear alignments between government funding with RDA priorities and greater integration of RDA activities with those in government departments.

Another issue that concerned some RDA representatives was the addition of social objectives, such as social inclusion, into the scope of RDAs. This research identified a desire on the part of RDAs for a greater understanding of social inclusion issues and how RDAs can direct their activities to address them.

…at this point the community policy aspects are a little new to the RDA as the RDB had an economic development focus whereas the RDA is meant to have a broader approach including social aspects. This may cause problems in the future.
(Participant # 55)

RDAs are working in a congested policy space with multiple players across multiple jurisdictions and departments. This issue is further complicated by the different RDA structures that exist in the different states and territories. The interrelationship between various levels of government and RDAs in the absence of clear mandated authority to act was frustrating for some RDA stakeholders. The participants

demonstrated high levels of commitment to their work and were ambitious for strong measurable outcomes which they felt were hampered by their role as 'facilitators' of change.

The concept is great and the three-way partnership between federal, state and local government should be robust. It's all a bit of a talk fest – where is the benefit? It (the RDAs) should build value on what we had.
(Participant # 9)

A need for a clear communication and reporting structure

Many participants commented that there were confused lines of communication between RDAs and the three levels of government. RDA staff and committees were unsure about how to connect with each layer of government. This issue was different across states and territories because of their individual structures. Accountability demands within each level of government were not coherent resulting in some agencies having to provide two very different reports at different times of the year – one for the Federal government and one for the State government (and Local government in certain situations).

We spend all our time reporting to our masters. Each government department has a different set of forms and require reports at different times… We should be able to submit one report in one format to all levels of government.
(Participant # 11)

Access into multiple government departments with their own priorities and programs was also frustrating and RDAs often found it difficult to martial the levels of support required for meaningful collaboration.

A need to encourage greater co-operation and collaboration between RDAs

Most participants believed that cooperation and collaboration between RDAs was a critical element in ensuring their effectiveness. Participants believed that this cooperation needed to take place within each state but also across state and territory borders. This was seen as particularly important for the ACT and NSW, NSW and Victoria and NSW and Queensland in order to address cross-border issues. Participants believed

that there was a need for workable frameworks to be established to assist with cross-border issues. Participants felt that there was a need to develop a culture and infrastructure of 'fluid shores' to enable collaboration across boundaries.

It is important to get all stakeholders to work together/talk together when addressing cross border - cross jurisdictional issues involving the three tiers of government. Particularly in regards to health, education and transport facilities ... For example, raise an issue about transport it gets passed on or back and forth between the various horizontal or vertical governments. Sixty percent of (workers) from_____ travel into _____ (in a different RDA region) every day- whose issue is that? ... Need to work together of course.
(Participant # 6)

We (RDA) have been working on a project with two other RDAs with great success. It makes us much more powerful in the eyes of government.
(Participant # 39)

It was also recognised that different influences on regions was important, and that recognition of difference was required across regions, states and the nation.

Increased funding

Funding issues for RDAs were addressed in terms of current performance and future opportunities. Many RDA representatives noted that they did not have the funds to undertake many of the activities that they saw as important. This problem would be exacerbated with the government's desire to increase the importance and activities of RDAs. The tyranny of distance makes conducting business within and across regions expensive and time consuming particularly in remote regions. It is remote regions which may stand to gain the most from cooperation across boundaries. It was felt that funding needed to emphasise equity for all regions, particularly those in remote areas.

It is very hard for us to do anything, even just getting our committee together, with our level of funding... we must have adequate funding if we are to do our job effectively. (Participant # 16)

Perceived competition for the available funding may provide some disincentives to foster a collaborative environment, an environment that many participants felt would be beneficial for RDAs.

Access to increased funding would improve our standing and credibility amongst the different stakeholders in our region.
(Participant # 44).

Multiple and competing agencies and activity

The existence of many organisations involved in regional development can often result in key stakeholders taking different approaches in isolation to each other. Given that regional development is a congested area there is considerable risk of duplication of effort, inefficient resource use, mixed messages to policy makers, and a lack of unity within regions. This can also create a high level of 'white noise' within the regional development space.

We (RDAs) have to make sure we don't just duplicate what others are doing otherwise we are just wasting our time ... we need to be better at the regional partnerships (Participant #14).

I think _____(a regional development organisation) feels threatened by us because they don't trust us.
(Participant # 22)

The problems arising from the existence of multiple and competing agencies have been exacerbated by the dearth of consistent baseline data and intelligence for interpretation at the regional level.

RDAs need to become recognised as the 'go to' body for problem/opportunity solving, particularly where a 'whole of government' multi-portfolio solution is required - be a source of knowledge for a region - first point of call.
(Participant # 23)

Initiatives and proposals arising from the workshop

Importantly, in addition to identifying issues, workshop participants also identified various initiatives and proposals that could assist in

improving the performances of RDAs which could maximise the effectiveness of their influence in regional development. The initiatives are now discussed.

Establishment of a clear and effective statutory framework for RDAs

It was suggested that research should be undertaken to identify and document a 'best practice' model that could be used for RDAs. This model could come from overseas or within Australia and could be refined on an on-going basis. It was considered important to establish a streamlined and simplified model of RDA reporting requirements that would reduce the administrative demands on RDAs and allow them to concentrate their efforts in a more effective way. Also highlighted was a need for clear and formal links between regional plans and government decisions and actions.

Establishment of a communication strategy

There was a strong feeling amongst participants that there was a need to increase the awareness of RDAs and their role within government and the community. Participants suggested that a number of medium, including brochures defining RDA's role and functions as well as newspaper stories, could be used to promote awareness of RDAs. In addition to increasing awareness it was suggested that there was also a need to ensure consistency of brand at a local, state and federal level through coordination at a federal level.

Creation of shared stakeholder engagement protocols

The creation of consistent stakeholder engagement protocols was considered an important development. It was felt that these protocols needed to include mechanisms for acknowledging stakeholder input and provide clear responsibility to Committees to be local champions in aligning all stakeholders.

Incentives to encourage collaboration and reduce duplication

Participants suggested that policies and funding options needed to provide incentives in order to encourage RDAs to work across different regions in situations where greater benefits could be derived from

collaboration. In addition, it was suggested that individual RDAs should be encouraged to share resources through identifying capacity and resource sharing opportunities.

It was felt that another factor that could encourage collaboration was the establishment of an RDA Advisory body for each State, similar to the one that existed in Victoria. Once established these organisations could contribute to a national advisory voice. Finally, it was felt that the government could also provide the actual hardware and technical infrastructure that would facilitate good communications especially for isolated regions.

Professional Training and Development

Professional development opportunities for staff and committee members were considered a very important initiative. The provision of a generic tool kit to support skills and resources was also considered an important initiative. Participants suggested that the adoption of a model similar to the Queensland 'drop boxes' of documents/information was another initiative that would support professional training and development.

In addition to professional development opportunities, participants felt that the establishment of a regular forum for RDA staff and committee members to meet face-to-face to discuss shared issues and network would be a valuable initiative.

Performance indicators

Measurement of performance against a set of clear and measurable criteria was seen as important. To this end, a set of accurate and effective Key Performance Indicators need to be determined. The indicators should reinforce a consistent role and mandate for RDAs and build greater self belief, ownership and capacity.

Consideration of the less tangible aspects of RDA activity was seen to be important. The inclusion of qualitative data that measured the health of the organisation such as staff turnover levels, the degree of recognition and satisfaction by RDA stakeholders, and the tangibility and saleability of outcomes, were among some specific suggestions.

3. DISCUSSION

Comments made by the Minister for Regional Australia, Regional Development and Local Government indicate that the government is keen to adopt a local and collaborative approach to regional development. The Minister has also indicated that he expects the RDA network to be the key agent in operationalising this approach.

Figure 1 provides a diagrammatic representation of how the authors view the government's vision for the RDA network. As illustrated, RDAs are expected to have a lead role in establishing and facilitating collaborative regional leadership networks involving organisations from the government and non-government sectors. In order for RDAs to perform their role effectively they require legitimacy, funding, capacity as well as political skills to deal with the various organisations and their individual needs. An effective RDA network will provide substantial outcomes for regions including a shared vision, strategic planning, and local solutions to local issues resulting in improved economic, social and environmental performance.
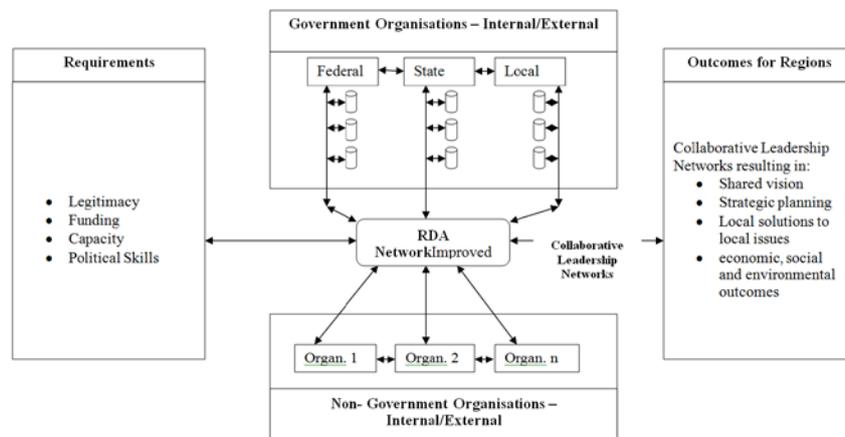
Figure 1 A vision for RDA's. Source: the Authors.

In order to facilitate local, collaborative leadership in regional development RDAs will require legitimacy and adequate funding. Adequate funding can in fact result in legitimacy. As discussed earlier while collaborative leadership consists of a network of organisations where no one organisation has sovereign leadership over other

organisations (Harmaakorpi and Niukkanen, 2007), organisations that are seen to be undertaking effective action (Mehra et al., 2006) as well as providing the most funding for collaboration (Morse, 2010) usually emerge as a lead organisation.

Clearly, in late-2010, RDA representatives perceived that they had neither the funding nor the legitimacy to be an effective organisation engaging in collaborative leadership at a local level. The proposed changes outlined by the government after the 2010 election offered the prospect that these areas would be addressed. However, it needs to be acknowledged that even with increased funding and legitimacy it will be difficult for RDAs to achieve a consensus amongst the range of regional stakeholders.

The provision of funding and legitimacy resulting in the emergence of RDAs as a lead organisation could potentially help overcome the traditionally fragmented approach adopted for regional development in Australia. A legitimate and adequately funded RDA could also help overcome parochialism that exists within a number of regional development organisations (Morrison and Lane, 2003; Conway et al., 2011). Finally, an RDA network that has legitimacy and funding could also assist in the coordination of federal, state and local government regional development initiatives.

Another historical problem in Australia has been that regional development agencies have typically engaged in relatively small-scale activities. There has been a failure to focus on a coordinated and strategic approach to regional and local planning and development. Some RDA representatives were concerned that RDAs may be preoccupied with projects at the expense of taking a more strategic role. In part, the project focus of the ACCs and RDBs on specific projects could militate against the adoption of a more strategic approach. However, the requirement for RDAs to prepare regional plans will hopefully help them adopt a strategic, long-term focus.

Finally, RDA representatives indicated that there was a need for professional development for staff and committee members. This was considered an important investment that would enable RDAs to fulfil their role more effectively.

4. CONCLUSION

A well-funded RDA network implementing a collaborative and strategic planning approach focused on local solutions to regional

development issues could be very effective. However, as this study suggests, there would have to be some considerable changes implemented for this to occur.

According to RDA representatives, when RDAs were first established it appeared that their role was poorly articulated and they received inadequate funding to undertake many meaningful tasks. As a result RDAs struggled to come to terms with their role and consequently they were unable to establish authority with government departments, other regional development organisations and the community. The lack of adequate funding also prevented RDAs from undertaking many of their intended activities including being involved in collaborative leadership. However, since the 2010 election, the federal government indicated that it would be providing much greater funding to RDAs to reflect the importance of their enhanced role.

It was apparent at the workshop that RDA representatives believed that the changed environment since the federal government election had the potential to increase their capabilities and abilities to achieve more effective outcomes. However they identified certain initiatives which need to be taken in order for this to occur. Firstly, there was a need for a clear and effective statutory framework that would allow for a set of clear key performance indicators to be established. This would allow a clear agenda to be set for RDAs enabling them to gauge their performance. Secondly, funding for RDAs has to sufficient for them to achieve their stated obligations.

The announcements made by the federal government since the 2010 election regarding regional development provide some expectations that RDAs will be provided with the required funding and authority to be in a position to address the fragmentation that occurs in regional development as well as undertake and identify strategic priorities for local and regional development. In addition, RDAs can hopefully undertake these activities by adopting a bottom-up approach while still operating in a larger macro environment.

Further research will need to be undertaken to see if the proposed government changes eventuate and how they impact on the perceptions of RDAs representatives in regards to their ability to improve their performance.

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