

23 October, 2020

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Dear Sir/ Madam,

RE: Inquiry into the indicators of, and impact of, regional inequality in Regional Australia

On 11 May, 2018 we made a submission to this Inquiry and also appeared as a witness to the hearing in Townsville on 7 November, 2018. We welcome the opportunity to provide this update as follows.

Context in which we are making this submission

RDA works across the 15 local government areas in north and north-west Queensland, an area that covers nearly 26% of Queensland. To put our comments in context, I provide the following facts about our region based on statistics from the Queensland Government Statistician's Office April 2016 Regional profile.

- In June 2019 the population was approximately 267,000; the long term forecast is for our regional population to increase to 353,000 by 2041.
- 73% of the population is located in Townsville, Northern Australia's largest city.
- 9.8% of the population identifies as being of Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islander background.
- The region has 81.9 homeless persons per 10,000 vs 45.6 per 10,000 in Queensland.
- Unemployment in the March Quarter was 7.9% (10,968 persons). While official unemployment figures are lower in October, 2020 we expect unemployment to increase after the Jobkeeper program finishes.
- The majority are in the region's two largest cities, Townsville and Mount Isa.
- Palm Island, Burke, Doomadgee, Mornington Island and Carpentaria have the highest unemployment rates ranging up to 58.6%.
- School and post-school completion/ graduation rates are lower than the State average.
- Industries in which the region has a high employment specialisation ratio are agriculture/ forestry/fishing, mining, utilities, public administration and education/ training.
- The region is a strong minerals, beef cattle, sugar and horticultural producer with significant volumes of these products going to export markets, often directly from the Port of Townsville to nearby Asian markets.

Fiscal policies at federal, state and local government levels

There is a general frustration with the zonal tax allowance being out of step with the current realities of the costs of living and low level of services received in regional areas such as ours. It would be timely to implement change and most importantly amend to the appropriate levels of compensation for the lack of services in rural and remote areas.

Improved co-ordination of federal, state and local government policies

There is not only a need for greater cross government coordination but also a need for cross-departmental collaboration in the same level of government.

Our experience has shown that:

- infrastructure investment decision-making occurs at the departmental level rather than the whole of government level to achieve whole of government objectives; this disadvantages initiatives that can generate benefits across multiple departments and their individual objectives;
- the current model of the federal government needing to defer to the state government on priorities in regional areas negates the ability for regional areas' priorities to be elevated for support if they compete with state government priorities which are often driven by capital city needs;
- state government grant programs would be best aligned with federal grant programs to deliver more leverage; while we understand this is a challenge, collaboration on regional economic development priorities and programs would reap benefits in the form of financial leverage for high priority projects that will deliver jobs and on-going economic and community benefits.

Regional development and decentralization policies

RDA is keen to work with all levels of government on the development of decentralization policy and initiatives, especially in the wake of COVID-19 which has highlighted new opportunities to work remotely.

In the meantime, the "Guidelines for analysing regional Australia impacts and developing a Regional Australia Impact Statement" is a good step towards understanding regional impacts of central policy planning, but the outcomes of this analysis are not always clear.

Infrastructure

Investment into regional road infrastructure has not kept pace with regional needs or expectations, while large scale projects continue to go ahead in metropolitan areas. We recommend it is time to review the methodologies and models used to make investment decisions, in particular in relation to regional roads investment.

While government budgets and programs are published, it is not always easy to compare like for like in regard to roads investment. Based on population, investment is driven mostly to metropolitan areas. However, if a wider range of factors was considered, a case could be built for more investment into regional areas. As mentioned above, whole of government objectives could lead to more investment into regional areas to achieve benefits that are of importance to multiple departments.

The Inland Queensland Roads Action Project (IQ-RAP), for which RDA is the Secretariat, delivered a plan in 2016 and a further updated Inland Queensland Road Network Strategy in 2018 to demonstrate the gaps between current road and bridge infrastructure and the Department of Transport and Main Roads' own standards. The reports identified that there were more than 300 bridges and 3,000km of road network that required upgrading to fit-for-purpose standards.

There is a strong economic rationale for investing in regional Queensland. Queensland is a decentralized state, with \$154 billion of Gross State Product (GSP) generated outside Greater Brisbane in 2015/16. That is equal to 49% of Queensland's annual GSP and 9% of Australia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Regional Queensland contributes more to the national economy than South Australia, Tasmania and the Northern Territory combined.

Regional Queensland hosts industries such as mining, resources and energy; agriculture; and tourism contributing significantly to GSP and employment. They contribute \$55 billion, \$20 billion and \$25 billion respectively to the national and state economy.

However, as noted above, road and bridge investment lags significantly.

The Queensland Roads and Transport Investment Program (QTRIP) provides guidance for the next four years but this doesn't meet the needs of local governments in developing their 10-year asset management plans and community development goals, nor does it give confidence for long-term retention of skilled workers and their families.

The 34 IQ-RAP partners, including 28 local governments, five RDA Committees and RACQ, believe there is a need and opportunity to reassess the framework for investment decision-making for regional roads. Productivity, safety, industry diversification through tourism, maintenance impacts on vehicles, animal welfare, dust impact on animals and crops and visibility and reliability of access are most important to inland road stakeholders; current benefit cost ratio analysis models favour the convenience factor for large numbers of commuters saving small amounts of commuting time in capital cities.

The current one size fits all decision making methodology is flawed when it comes to regional roads investment decision-making and this issue would apply to many other infrastructure cases.

AgriFutures Australia has also recently released a report on this same issue. <http://www.agrifutures.com.au/publications/research-activities-on-rural-roads/>

Education

There are many inequalities in regional, rural and remote areas with access to services, access to internet and education attainment levels being prime indicators of challenges. Based on 2016 census data:

- there is a significant lack of early childhood education and care services with only 7% of the state's services in the region despite covering an area of nearly 26% of the state;
- educational attainment levels are mostly below state levels;
 - o 6.1% of the population did not attend until year 8 or did not go to school at all vs 5.4% in Queensland;
 - o 28.8% completed school to year 9 or 10 vs 26.5% in Queensland;
 - o 54.5% completed school to year 11 or 12 vs 58.9% in Queensland;
 - o 13.8% have completed a bachelor degree or higher vs 18.3% in Queensland;
 - o In certificates and diplomas, the region has a slightly higher rate of achievement than the state average;
- There is lower internet connectivity in our region than the average of 83.7% in Queensland; it is most notable that remote communities have the lowest rates: Burke 49.5%, Doomadgee 55.2% and Palm Island 56.9%.
- Very high youth unemployment such as 61% in the Outback region is an indicator of the challenges of both lower education levels and the lack of local jobs.

Very importantly, there is a need to develop the skills required for 21st century jobs. Even right now major mines cannot secure the technically skilled workforce they require with recent vacancies of more than 300 positions at the major mine in Mount Isa. Science, Technology, Maths and Engineering (STEM) skills are in demand and will be even more important in years to come.

RDA has proposed a STEMBooster project to drive STEM skills across our entire region. Its core components are to work in partnership with industry in the region, engage with students, families, teachers and communities, put smart technology into schools where they do not have access and tailor curriculum into the Northern Australia setting. Based on industry and educator advice, the program would commence in years 7 to 10 and after embedding that it would then extend into grade 4 to 6. For more information, visit <https://www.rdanwq.org.au/projects/stembooster/>

Without intervention to significantly expand the awareness, interest, study at all levels of education and use of STEM skills, our industries and businesses will not have the required skill sets to sustain and grow. From a broader regional perspective, we also risk further population decline if opportunities are not created locally which would encourage an expanding drift of young people to cities.

I would be delighted to respond to any questions you may have. I can be contacted on [REDACTED]
[REDACTED] or [REDACTED]

Yours Sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Glenys Schuntner

Chief Executive Officer

