

REGIONAL GOVERNANCE IN RURAL AUSTRALIA: AN EMERGENT PHENOMENON OF THE QUEST FOR LIVEABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY?

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ABSTRACT

Change is inherent to both social and natural systems and their interaction. The complexity of the dynamics of change and uncertainty associated with linked social-natural systems and their multi-scalar and spatially variable nature is widely recognised as adversely impacting on liveability and sustainability in many contexts. Institutions and policies that have traditionally been concerned with managing our social and natural systems for liveability and sustainability are being challenged by the complexity of the policy problems now being faced as well as the growing pace and magnitude of change and the uncertainty that it embodies. An important element of the response to this change is an emerging shift in public policy from uncoordinated hierarchical top-down sectoral or program-specific approaches to more 'holistic' regional approaches that emphasise inter-sectoral coordination and cross-scale co-operation. Several disciplines and inter-disciplinary fields have shown an interest in the dynamics of this change identifying the complex, multi-level and nested nature of the governance at the regional or territorial level. Much of this work however has focused on sector-specific issues or particular programmatic policy initiatives, and seldom provides a more holistic examination of the complexity of the overall system of multi-level governance in practice at the regional level and the related challenges and opportunities for supporting livability and sustainability more effectively. Drawing on the concepts of complex systems and adaptive governance in a regional policy context, this paper addresses this gap and reports on the first of three case studies examining the current nature and future options for regional governance in Australia. Based on a case study of the rural and remote region of Central Western Queensland in north-eastern Australia, we examine the nature and emerging trends of the existing system of regional governance and consider its potential for enhancing regional capacity to adapt to change and support liveability and sustainability in rural Australia.

Keywords: social-natural systems, change, regional governance, rural Australia

INTRODUCTION

Change is inherent to both social and natural systems and their interaction. Insights from a large diverse literature emphasizes that societies that depend closely on natural resources need to enhance their capacity to adapt to change and the uncertainty they face and to be better able to shape their futures (e.g. Gunderson *et al.* 1995, Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000; Gunderson and Holling 2002; Berkes *et al.* 2003, Booper and Innes 2003; Dietz *et al.* 2003; Tompkins and Adger 2004; Folke *et al.* 2005). The complexity of the dynamics of change and uncertainty associated with linked social-natural systems and their multi-scalar and spatially variable nature is widely recognised as adversely impacting on liveability and sustainability in many contexts.

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‘Sustainability’ as a complex, evolving and often contested concept has generated much debate (e.g. Cortner and Moote 1999; Dovers 2000; Connor and Dovers 2004; Redclift 2005). Contemporary interpretations of ‘*sustainability*’ emphasise: the interconnectedness of environmental, economic and social dimensions from local to global scales; the long term nature of problem framing and of the related policy processes needed to address these three dimensions in tandem; equity both within contemporary society (intragenerational) and in terms of the legacy of future generations (intergenerational); and the urgency of the need for action. Like sustainability, ‘liveability’ is a multi-faceted concept subject to varying interpretations that commonly encompass a wide range of issues relating to ‘quality of life’, ‘well being’ and ‘life satisfaction’ (NRC 2002; BrookLyndhurst 2004). What can be said is that liveability has a dominantly community focus and it is commonly recognised as an integral component of sustainability, although potentially a conflicting one. In a public policy context, ‘*liveability*’ has been defined broadly as “the extent to which the attributes of a particular place can, as they interact with one another and with activities in other places, satisfy residents by meeting their economic, social, and cultural needs, promoting their health and well-being, and protecting natural resources and ecosystem functions” (NRC 2002, p. 23).

Worldwide, institutions and policies that have traditionally been concerned with managing our social and natural systems for liveability and sustainability are being challenged by the complexity of the policy problems now being faced as well as the growing pace and magnitude of change and the uncertainty that it embodies (e.g. Wondolleck and Yaffee 2000; Dietz *et al.* 2003, Innes and Booher 2003; van Bueren *et al.* 2003; Bellamy 2007; Olsson *et al.* 2007; Head 2008). To address these challenges at the regional and global levels, Dietz *et al.* (2003) identified a number of critical functional requirements for the governance of complex social-natural systems, that is: providing necessary information; dealing with conflict; inducing compliance with rules; providing physical, technical and institutional infrastructure; and being prepared for change through adaptation and learning. Furthermore, these requirements Dietz *et al.* (2003) identified three principles of robust governance that are particularly relevant for regional problems in linked social-natural systems, namely (p. 1910):

- *Analytic deliberation*: well structured dialogue involving interested parties (e.g. scientists, resource users, policy makers, interested publics) in informed discussions of rules that provide the information and trust in it that are essential for building social capital, allowing for change and dealing with inevitable conflict ;
- *Nesting*: that is, allocating authority to allow for adaptive governance at multiple levels from local to global through institutional arrangements that are complex, redundant and nested in many layers; and
- *Institutional variety*: employ mixtures of institutional types (e.g. hierarchies, market-based forms of resource allocation and community self-governance) that employ a variety of decision rules to change incentives, increase information, monitor use, and induce compliance.

In the past decade or so, an important element of the policy response to these emerging and complex challenges being faced worldwide has been a shifting emphasis across all

areas of public policy from uncoordinated hierarchical top-down sectoral or program-specific approaches to more holistic ‘governance’ approaches that emphasise inter-sectoral coordination and cross-scale co-operation, (e.g. Stoker 1998; Peters and Pierre 2000; Rhodes 1996; Huxham 2003; Hooghe and Marks 2003; Swyngedouw 2005). This shift is particularly identified with recognition of the need for greater interaction between a wider range of actors operating across an increasing number of decision-making levels and, more recently, with new governance approaches co-existing and complementing rather than ‘eclipsing’ traditional hierarchical government (e.g. Jordan *et al.* 2005; Paavola *et al.* 2009, Bell and Hindmoor 2009; Rauschmeyer *et al.* 2009).

The notions of complexity and systems thinking are key to understanding the perceived failures of traditional hierarchical government and the emergence of more holistic, participatory and deliberative governance (e.g. Folke *et al.* 2005; Lebel *et al.* 2006; Bellamy 2007). From local to global scales, linked social and natural systems do not respond to change in “smooth” linear ways, rather they are dynamic and characterised by accelerating complexity, uncertainty, disorganisation and irregular or sudden changes that are multilevel, often difficult to predict and potentially irreversible or very difficult and costly to manage (e.g. Gunderson and Holling 2002; Berkes *et al.* 2003; Folke *et al.* 2005; Klijn 2008). A systems thinking approach to understanding complexity and change highlights the need to see things as wholes and think about systems from the perspectives of interconnectedness, context, process, structure, meaning, knowledge and power (e.g. Barton *et al.* 2004). It also involves an appreciation of ‘*emergent properties*’, which are properties that exist at one scale and not necessarily at another and appear when a system is examined as a whole instead of separate parts.

Several disciplines and inter-disciplinary fields have addressed the dynamics of change identifying the complex, evolutionary, multi-level and nested nature of governance common to linked social-natural systems (e.g. Gunderson and Holling 2002; Dietz *et al.* 2003; Berkes *et al.* 2003; Folke *et al.* 2005; Lebel *et al.* 2006; Ansell and Gash 2007). Others have identified the changing and increasingly multi-functionality of rural landscapes and relatedly the complexity of rural governance including the emergence of ‘new regionalism’ (e.g. Marsden 1998; Goodwin 1998; Holmes 2006; Bjorkhaug and Richards 2008). Significantly, the multifunctional character of our rural landscapes involves multiple but often conflicting benefits (such as food, water supply, recreation, commerce, human health, ecosystem services), which are linked to a multiplicity of stakeholders (across government, private and community sectors) with diverse and plural values, responsibilities and agendas; which may themselves be conflicting (Bellamy 2007).

Changes in rural governance in Australia is well recognised as a response to complex interrelated factors, such as: global economic integration and competition; increasing demands for regional communities having greater influence over and participating more directly in the decision making that impacts on their futures; the need for a better platform for improved government-community engagement; and increasing demands for greater accountability in policy processes (e.g. Dore *et al.* 2003; Bellamy *et al.* 2003; Everingham *et al.* 2006; Brown 2007; Wallington *et al.* 2008, Everingham 2009). Significantly, the policy and decision-making context in rural Australia is increasingly becoming more complex and variable, both in time and space. However, much of the

diverse research examining new governance approaches to addressing complex policy problems has to-date focused on:

- *Sector-specific issues* – for example: urban governance (Wagenaar 2006; Feiock 2007, 2009); water management policy (Imperial 2005; Lebel *et al.* 2005; Pahl-Wostl 2007), regional development (Marsden 1998; Goodwin 1998; Murdoch 2000; Lebel *et al.* 2006; Lyall 2007); marine resources and fisheries (Berkes 2006); community-based natural resource management (Armitage 2005; Wallington *et al.* 2008); and integrated service delivery (Keast and Brown 2006).
- *Particular programmatic policy initiatives* – for example: Lubell (2004); Pahl-Wostl (2007); Pahl-Wostl *et al.* (2008); Bocher (2008); and Lejano and Ingram (2009).
- *Particular models of multi-party relationships* – such as: multi-organisational partnerships (e.g. Lowndes and Skelcher 1998); collaborative planning (Innes and Booher 1999; 2003; network governance (Everingham *et al.* 2006; Klijn 2008), collaborative governance (Pahl-Wostl *et al.* 2007; Huxham *et al.* 2000); or co-management (Olsson *et al.* 2004; Carlsson and Berkes 2005; Plummer and Armitage 2007; Armitage *et al.* 2008; Berkes 2009).
- *Integrated knowledge systems and social learning* – for example see: Bouwen and Tailleur (2004); Davidson-Hunt (2006); Pahl Wostl *et al.* (2008); Pahl Wostl (2006); Mostert *et al.* 2007; Steyaert *et al.* (2007); Rist *et al.* (2007).

With some notable exceptions (e.g. Hahn *et al.* 2006; Olsson *et al.* 2007; Everingham 2009), seldom does this work involve a holistic examination of the whole regional system of multi-level governance in practice, and the related challenges and opportunities for supporting livability and sustainability more effectively from a regional perspective. As Ansell and Gash (2007) comment:

“ much of the literature is focused on the *species* rather than the *genus*. The bulk of the collaborative governance literature is composed of single-case case studies focused on sector-specific governance issues like site-based management of schools, community policing, watershed councils, regulatory negotiation, collaborative planning, community health partnerships, and natural resource comanagement (the species). Moreover, a number of the most influential theoretical accounts of this phenomenon are focused on specific types of collaborative governance. Healey (1996, 2003) and Innes and Booher (1999a, 1999b), for example, provide foundational accounts of collaborative planning, as Freeman (1997) does for regulation and administrative law and Wondolleck and Yaffee (2000) do for natural resources management.” (p.544)

Drawing on the concepts of complex systems and multi-level governance in a regional policy context, this paper addresses this gap and reports on the first of three case studies examining the current nature and future options for regional governance in Australia. Based on a case study of the rural and remote region of Central Western Queensland in north-eastern Australia, we examine the nature and emerging trends of the existing system of regional governance and consider its potential for enhancing regional capacity to adapt to change and support liveability and sustainability in rural Australia.

REGIONAL GOVERNANCE IN AUSTRALIA

A Complex Federal System of Government

Australia's federal system involves three spheres of government – national, state and local; there is no formal regional sphere of government. In this system, Australia has six State and two Territory governments each of which are very large – in terms of both geography and population. There is no single uniform national system of local government but, as an artifact of the State governments, over 800 local governments across Australia have been created and variously controlled by each of the different State governments within their respective jurisdictions. Local government is often very small and under-resourced in Australia compared to many other countries. In part to compensate for this, state and local governments now often organise their affairs around 'regional' planning strategies, policymaking arrangements, community engagement initiatives and a variety of permanent and temporary regional bodies. The Australian federal government also has a strong and growing interest in the regional level of governance, especially as it enters into more agreements with state and local agencies about how national responses to major policy issues are to be made effective at the community level, particularly in response to demands for enhancing liveability and sustainability.

What is 'Regional Governance'?

The term 'governance' is a multi-faceted and often contested concept in the literature that has emerged for various policy alternatives to conventional top-down hierarchical government control (e.g. Rhodes 1996; Stoker 1998; Peters and Pierre 1998; Swyngedouw 2005). Stoker (1998) describes this global shift as "the development of governing styles in which boundaries between public and private sectors have become blurred" (p.17). More specifically, in the context of the adaptive governance of linked social-natural systems, Druit and Galaz (2008) argue "a fundamental shift is on the way in how we govern ourselves. There is a move away from command-and-control management performed by Weberian bureaucrats within centralized national bureaucracies toward a plethora of different schemes of self-government, public-private partnerships, collaborative efforts, policy entrepreneurs, and participatory initiatives usually gathered under the umbrella term of 'governance'." (p. 328-329). Moreover, Bocher (2008) notes that although the term governance has "become increasingly used in policy fields in which political co-ordination problems arise in general, and in regional policy in particular", there is not one commonly agreed definition of 'governance' or 'regional governance' in political and scientific discussions (p. 373).

What is clear however is that 'governance' involves more than government – it is the entire process of how decisions get made and how the community runs, involving many organisations, interest groups and the broader citizenry. For example, Bellamy (2007) has described the governance for natural resource management within Australia's federal system as involving "a complex system of multiple 'nested' or polycentric decision-making arrangements (versus being neatly hierarchical) being carried out concurrently across a range of political decision-making levels (e.g. national, state, region, local) and horizontally across a fragmented array of territorial and sectoral areas. This system is continually evolving at all political and sectoral levels. ... At each level of this

complex multi-layered and polycentric system, there are different emergent properties and problems to be addressed” (p.104-5).

In this paper, therefore, we use the concept of ‘*regional governance*’ as a loose descriptor of the structures, processes and relationships by which decisions are made, and power exercised and shared, at spatial levels larger than localities and smaller than the States in most parts of Australia. While strongly connected with the three existing tiers of government, ‘regional governance’ in Australia is concerned with meeting the needs of the specific regional community, particularly in terms of liveability and sustainability.

CASE STUDY: RURAL AND REMOTE CENTRAL WESTERN QUEENSLAND REGION

This paper draws on research undertaken as part of the project, *Towards Sustainable Regional Institutions: the Nature, Role and Governance Implications of Contemporary Australian Regionalism* (<http://www.griffith.edu.au/federalism/>), which aims to provide a sociologically-grounded description of regionalism as a vital element of Australian public policy and political culture. One of the project’s core components involves three Australian regional governance case studies which collectively will contribute towards a more accurate description of how regional governance currently works, to support discussion about institutional reforms to the federal system as a whole and how this can deliver better governance outcomes at the regional level, as well as locally and nationally. This paper focuses on the findings from the first of these case studies in the rural and remote Central Western Queensland (CWQ) region.

CWQ Case Study Methodology

The Central Western Queensland (CWQ) case study was undertaken as a collaborative partnership between the Griffith University Regional Governance Project (www.griffith.edu.au/federalism) and the CWQ region’s Remote Area Planning and Development Board (RAPAD) (www.rapad.com.au). The case study methodology involved a multi-method approach including:

- A desktop review of publically available information on the scope, structure and function of a diverse range of peak regional bodies, programs and committees and stakeholder groups in the CWQ region. Spatial digital maps of a number of different administrative regionalizations relevant to the CWQ region were also integrated in GIS-format;
- A two-day workshop on the current nature and future of regional governance in Central Western Queensland held in December 2007 with 21 participants (covering all local governments in the region, two community-based regional NRM groups, one NGO and one state government agency); and
- Four small group consultations conducted in Longreach in December 2007 involving 12 representatives from state government agencies and local not-for-profit organisations operating in the CWQ region which were loosely organised around four different sectoral groupings (i.e. natural resources and water, primary industries, fisheries (3 participants); education and training (2 participants); transport,

infrastructure and planning, health and aged care (6 participants); and regional local government (1 participant).

In sum, the case study analysis draws on a review of regional institutional arrangements and the perspectives of 30 participants from the CWQ region obtained through group interviews and/or an interactive workshop (3 of whom participated in both) and in total came from the local government sector (17), regionally-based state government agencies (10), community-based regional groups (2) and the charitable non-profit sector (1).

CWQ Region: A linked social-natural system

At the commencement of this study in December 2007, the CWQ region encompassed eleven local government or municipal areas covering an area of nearly 385,000 sq. km. in a rural and remote part of north-eastern Australia. However, with the implementation of a controversial local government reform process by the Queensland State government in June 2008, these eleven shires were amalgamated into seven local government entities (i.e. three Regional Councils and four shires). The CWQ region includes 17 rural towns with the major regional townships being Longreach, Barcaldine, Blackall and Winton. Within the CWQ region, Longreach is the primary regional centre providing the focus for business, administration and government services to the region, although other centres outside the CWQ region including Mt. Isa to the north and Rockhampton on the eastern coastline are also important business and government centres for the CWQ region.

In terms of its natural resources, the CWQ region has a hot dry climate with highly variable rainfall and periodic flooding events, which pose major challenges for rural communities in the region. As part of the upper catchment of the Lake Eyre Basin (the world's largest internal drainage system), the region is rich in natural assets which are highly diverse; ranging from the eucalypt woodlands in the east along the Great Dividing Range, through the rolling Mitchell grasslands and the vast flood plains of the Channel Country and the Simpson Desert dune fields in the south and west. These natural resources are currently the key drivers of economic activity in the CWQ region with the main industries underpinning the CWQ economy being sheep and cattle grazing and tourism (Dollery and Johnson 2007). Transport and water infrastructure are also vital components of the region's economy and social fabric. With a low and irregular rainfall, the CWQ region relies on both surface and ground water for agriculture, stock water, town water, recreation and tourism. Tourism focused on the region's natural features, natural beauty and Australian history is rapidly emerging as a major land use in the region, alongside the more traditional pastoralism, agriculture and mining.

The most significant sources of employment are the agricultural industries with retail trade, construction, health services, education and construction being also important. Since the labour intensive early days of the pastoral industry and the boom of the 1950's, the region's population has generally been in decline. The regional population currently is approximately 15,000 (or about 0.3% of the State of Queensland's population) spread between 17 townships and some 1,300 rural properties. This population is expected to continue to slowly decline with the region's share of Queensland's population decreasing to only 0.2 percent by 2026. In addition, given its large geographical size and low total population, the region's population density is very low, with most of its shires having less than a single persons/km². In a recent major economic study of local government in

CWQ, Dollery and Johnston (2007) concluded that the ‘tyranny of distance’ for this region is overwhelming:

The shire councils under review must maintain a vast area 1½ times greater than the size of the Britain! In addition, a number of the shire councils are actually closer to Adelaide than they are to the Queensland capital of Brisbane. The significance of this vast, sparsely-populated area is that the councils will struggle to achieve economics of scale in the delivery of the services (p.85).

Drivers of Change in CWQ

Common to most of rural Australia, over the last two decades the CWQ community has faced significant change due to major challenges largely beyond its control that are impacting on livelihood options and the future of the region. For example, a recent report on Australian agricultural futures identified that:

Australia’s agriculture sector has undergone considerable change over the last few decades. While continuing to grow in absolute terms, the size and importance of agriculture has declined relative to the rest of the economy. Within the sector, there have been marked changes in the number and size of Australian farms, the make-up of agricultural activities and the production and marketing strategies employed by farmers.

Some of the key factors shaping these trends have been changes in consumer demands and government policies, technological advances and innovation and emerging environmental concerns. The unrelenting decline in the sector’s terms of trade (that is, the ratio of prices received to prices paid) has been an important source of pressure for adaptation and change by Australian farmers. The sector has also had to respond to the continuing challenge of variations in seasonal conditions. (Productivity Commission 2005, p. xvii).

In particular, through workshops and interviews, participants of this case study identified a number of key inter-related factors currently influencing the dynamics of change within the CWQ region. These can be broadly grouped as: changing rural industries; changing public attitudes and expectations; changing public policies and on-going social changes within a remote rural community.

Changing Rural Industries

- A significant decline in the size and importance of agriculture within the regional economy.
- A changing rural industry context with a shift to fewer, larger and more export-oriented farms/properties accompanied by a shift in dominant ownership from family farms to corporations running a group of properties involving absentee landlords, increased use of contract workers from outside the region, and loss of longer-term and ‘corporate’ knowledge of the region.

Changing Public Attitudes and Expectations

- An emerging shift in perceptions within the broader public towards a greater recognition of the importance of the impact of environmental issues such as water resource use and climate change to long term regional sustainability.

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- Increasing political and community awareness of the complexities and interdependencies within rural landscapes and social contexts and the need for an increased focus on new regional community-based management or governance to deal with cross-scale and cross-sectoral issues such as natural resource management, human health services, transport infrastructure and tourism.

Changing Public Policies

- Greater emphasis on the *regional delivery* of state and federal government policies, in particular: within the local government amalgamation reform process in Queensland; through new and evolving national policy approaches to deliver partnership-based regional natural resource management programs and planning processes; and in both water resource and biosecurity reform processes.
- A continuing decline of State government budgets in some key sectors (e.g. agriculture, natural resource management, and education and training) which is impacting significantly on the capacity of relevant government agencies to manage their responsibilities and to deliver effective regional services within the CWQ region.
- Changing roles of state government agencies located in the region including: a shift from service provision (e.g. research and extension in NRM and agricultural domains) to a more dominant focus on compliance (e.g. for water use, vegetation management and biosecurity) and accountability (e.g. greater demand for evaluation of impact and outcomes); and as well ambiguity and even conflict (within both government and community alike) over the different government agency roles and responsibilities in relation to particular problems and issues.
- Changing roles of local government and related concerns for state and federal government cost-shifting. In particular, an expanding role of local government beyond the traditional local roads, rates and rubbish and other services to property to include, for example, a greater role in the delivery of human services (e.g. health and welfare, education), regional planning processes and initiatives (e.g. NRM, transport, tourism, health); and in the enforcement of regulation (e.g. pest management, waste control and environmental health).

On-going Social Changes

- The continuing decline in the region's population is leading to an associated loss of skills and human resources as well as growing difficulties in attracting a competitive pool of competent staff in public, private and not-for-profit arenas.

Collectively these factors have significant implications for liveability and sustainability in CWQ and in particular for the nature and practice of regional governance which this paper addresses.

Regional Identity: Spatial or Functional?

From the collective perspectives of participants of this case study, multiple and overlapping definitions exist for 'the CWQ region' in terms of its conception for regional governance purposes. Many of these conceptions identified by study participants were based on spatial '*regionalisations*' used by local, state or federal governments (or

government-related bodies) “as an administrative strategy for recognising and dealing with the spatial layout of society” largely for purposes of planning, bureaucratic organisation or coordination, funding distribution, service delivery, community engagement, etc. (Brown 2007, p.14). Moreover, participants identified in December 2007 that state and federal government agencies operating in the CWQ region all used different geographical administrative boundaries for planning, service delivery and other administrative purposes. Importantly significant ‘non-alignment’ or ‘mismatch’ of these administrative and political boundaries existed particularly amongst and between the different agencies of the state and federal governments. For example, at the state level, the Department of Primary Industries and Fisheries, the Department of Health and the Department of Education and Training all have different administrative boundaries that were essentially aligned east-west across the state and administratively they were centrally-based on the eastern coast at Rockhampton, some distance away from the region. While, other departments such Natural Resources and Water, Environmental Protection Authority, Department of Main Roads, Department of Infrastructure and Planning, and Department of Local Government variously either aligned their administrative boundaries north-south in this part of the state and/or have separate western or central western administrative regions. However, none of these were geographically or spatially aligned amongst themselves. In addition, federal government agencies used another quite different set of boundaries; for example, Area Consultative Committee boundaries used by the then federal government’s Department of Infrastructure, Transport, Regional Development and Local Government largely for funding distribution to regions across Australia were not align with any of the Queensland state government agencies’ administrative boundaries; nor did the federal government’s 56 regions for delivering Regional Natural Resource Management policies.

Notwithstanding the existence of ‘blurred’ conceptions of the spatial boundaries for the CWQ, ‘*regionalism*’ does exist in the CWQ area. Common to these multiple spatial identities is the recognition by study participants that ‘the region’ provides an appropriate level for effective organisation and policy implementation for many issues and service delivery functions across multiple policy areas (e.g. regional development, health, education, natural resource management, infrastructure planning and sustainable rural industries), and also for community collective decision-making. This concurs with Marsden’s (1998) identification in the UK rural context of “differentiated rural spaces (with) different local/non-local social configurations of networks and actors” and the recognition that these rural spaces are increasingly less likely to be shaped by agriculture but rather by “local and non-local networks, supply chains and regulatory systems” which combine in particular places in highly variable ways.

Moreover, implicit to participant responses is a recognition and to some degree acceptance of the multiple definitions or ‘blurred’ and sometimes conflicting boundaries for the region, although they may find them frustratingly inefficient and sometimes conflicting in practice. This concurs with Everingham’s (2009) reference to a “congested” regional governance landscape in Australia characterized by “blurred spatial, functional and sectoral boundaries” (p.88). It also supports Jones and McLeod’s (2004) argument that given “the permeability and indeterminacy of regional boundaries”, regions can be conceived as “open and relational rather than self-contained” (p.436).

In sum, participants identified the CWQ region as a complex rural and remote area with multiple spatial definitions in practice that involve a number of paradoxes. Some conceptions are akin to Hamlin and Marcucci's (2008) 'marginal' type of rural area for the USA with "less viable global-scale agriculture and is distant from metropolitan areas, and thus struggles to keep residents and provide services" (p. 470) and Marsden's (1998) 'clientelistic countryside' category for rural areas in the UK which are commonly dependent on subsidies by government for survival (p. 108). Moreover, some conceptions conform to what Brown (2007) refers to as regions that are more "a product of top-down 'regionalisation', than 'bottom-up' regionalism' based on political self-identification and/or cultural expression", while others are a "hybrid between top-down and bottom-up concepts of regionalism" including "a new suite of administrative initiatives in community engagement and place management, often targeted to ... rural community renewal" (p. 14). Importantly, the significance and potential of the CWQ region as a 'functional entity' was widely recognised by the participants of this study; that is more than a geographical or administrative boundary of spatial identity.

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Multiple Relationships

A diverse heterogeneous range of regional bodies, programs, committees and community-based groups were recognised by the participants of this research as constituting 'regional governance' in CWQ in practice. As such, regional governance involves a wide range of appointed and elected local, state and federal officials, as well as private actors from a number of functionally-specific institutions and bodies – including: Regional Organisations of Councils (ROCs), Area Consultative Committees (ACCs) for regional development, catchment management authorities and other natural resource management bodies, economic and community development organisations, regionalised health boards and services, regionalized education and training arrangements, regionalised transport planning arrangements, cross-sectoral regional tourism bodies, and so on. This complex web of initiatives involves all three spheres of government as well as community-based organisations and professional and rural industry groups. These are listed in Table 1 and include:

- Federal Government regional policy initiatives (3);
- State Government regional policy initiatives (6);
- Local Government regional alliances (1);
- Community-based regional partnerships and alliances (5);
- Charitable/'Not-for-profit' organisations (2);
- Private professional and rural industry groups (2).

In this fragmented regional institutional landscape, most governance initiatives are either sectorally-focused or functionally-specific and involve relationships between two or more levels of government and/or regionally-based private and charitable sectors. Notably, few involve formal relationships amongst themselves, although the same individuals or

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representatives operating or living in the region in some capacity are frequently found to be common to a number of these initiatives.

An Emergent Property of a Complex Regional System

The complex web of regional governance entities and relationships that emerge includes a number of different forms or modes of governance including:

- **Hierarchies:** that is, traditional forms of top-down control and regulation through state authorities or akin to what are referred to by Jones and Macleod's (2004) as "centrally orchestrated regionalizations" or "state-driven programmed spatiality"; by Hoogie and Marks' (2006) as "publically-empowered organisations"; and by Bocher (2008) as "traditional sectoral policy approaches".
- **Networks:** that is, state or federal government cross-sectoral entities either for facilitating state government regional coordination and planning or acting as advisory committees on regional issues.
- **Centrally orchestrated multi-stakeholder collaborations:** that is, what Wallington *et al.* (2008) refer to as multistakeholder bodies "based on an active partnership between government actors and community-based and private sector organisations"; or what Bocher (2008) calls "inter-sectoral co-operation through regional networks and partnerships ... bringing interested local organisations and agents of government together to pool their resources ... offer a horizontal dimension (in region partnerships) and a vertical dimension (partnerships between the region and higher political levels" (p.375); or what Shortall (2004) refers to as partnerships that "do not emerge from the grassroots" but are "initiated at a higher level [than regional] by statutory organisation" (p.120).
- **Public-private cooperative partnerships:** that is, non-profit driven charitable service providers in a voluntary partnership with government (i.e. federal and/or state).
- **Ad hoc and self-organising coalitions or partnerships:** that is, akin to Hall and Stern's (2009) "partial, voluntary and ad hoc regional cooperations" that "emphasise the role of partnerships and networks beyond the formal structures of government", and including what Folke *et al.*, (2005) refer to as "loosely structured governance entities that spontaneously emerge or self-organise" within regions.

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Table 1. Key regional governance initiatives identified in CWQ.

Regional initiative	Sectoral focus	Primary Relationships	Key mode of governance
Federal Government Mandated Regional Initiatives: 1. West Region Sub-Committee of the Central Queensland Area Consultative Committee (ACC) 2. The Darling Matilda Way Sustainable Region Advisory Committee 3. Auslink Roads to Recovery/Black Spot Programs	Regional development Regional development Transport	Federal government, local government, business and community organisations Federal government, local government, regional business and community organisations Federal, State and local governments	Hierarchy Hierarchy Hierarchy
State Government Mandated Regional Initiatives: 4. Central Queensland Ministerial Regional Community Forum 5. CW Regional Managers Co-ordination network 6. Central-Western Regional Planning Advisory Committee 7. Central West Health Community Council 8. CW Regional Coordination Group for NRM 9. Outback Regional Roads Group	Multi-sector Multi-sector Integrated Regional Planning Health NRM Transport	State Government executive with regional community representative Managers of all regionally-based State Government agencies in the region State agencies with local governments, federal regional bodies, regional NRM groups, and rural industry State health department with appointed community representatives State government agencies involved in NRM State government with local government representatives	Hierarchy Network – cross sectoral Hierarchy Hierarchy Network of NRM managers Hierarchy
Local Government Regional Alliances: 10. Remote Area Planning and	Regional	Voluntary arrangement amongst all Local	Voluntary self-

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Development Board (RAPAD)	development / sustainable growth	Governments in CWQ region	organising partnership
11. Western Queensland Local Government Association	Regional economic development	Voluntary arrangement amongst Local Governments and Regional Councils in south of region	Voluntary self-organising coalition
Community-Based Regional Partnerships/Alliances:			
12. Desert Channels Queensland Inc	Natural resource management	Federally/state government-mandated partnership amongst representatives of regional community	Centrally-orchestrated multi-stakeholder collaboration
13. Desert Uplands Build-up and Development Strategy Committee	Natural resource management	Voluntary regional community-based organisation collaborating primarily with Federal/State government mandated NRM groups	Voluntary self-organising coalition
14. Central West Outback Queensland Tourism Authority	Tourism	Alliance between state government, shire councils in region and regionally-based tourism organisations	Centrally-orchestrated multi-stakeholder collaboration
15. South-West Regional Development Association	Regional economic development	Voluntary arrangement between regional community groups and Local Governments	Voluntary self-organising coalition
16. Central West Aboriginal Corporation	Indigenous	Federal government-endorsed voluntary community organisation of Indigenous peoples	Voluntary self-organising coalition
Charitable / Non Profit Organisations:			
17. Royal Flying Doctor Service (Queensland Section)	Health	Voluntary service arrangement between a charitable organisation and federal & state governments	Public-private cooperative partnership
18. Anglicare Central Queensland	Social welfare	Charitable service provider in partnership with other community groups and federal and state government	Public-private cooperative partnership
Private professional / Rural Industry Groups:			
19. North and West Queensland Primary Health Care	Health	Alliance of rural GPs with other health service providers	Voluntary self-organising partnership

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20. AgForce (North Queensland)	Rural industry	Alliance of rural producers (beef, sheep, wool, grains)	Voluntary self-organising coalition
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The dominant governance modes of the key regional governance initiatives in the CWQ are also identified in Table 1. Significantly, in practice at the regional level, hierarchies and networks and multi-stakeholder collaboration modes are the governance tools or practices of federal and state governments in rural and remote CWQ region. Public-private partnerships are the regional governance tools or practices used predominantly by the charitable and ‘non-profit’ sector, while voluntary ad hoc/self-organising coalitions are the common regional governance tools or practices of the local government sector, regional community and industry groups and the indigenous sector.

Regional governance in CWQ is dispersed across multiple jurisdictions fostering multiple relationships at the regional level between federal, state and local governments as well as community-based regional groups, not-for-profit organisations and professional and rural industry bodies. In addition, the importance of informal relationships to the functioning of regional governance in CWQ was clearly evident in participant responses. Thus, while no formally recognised regional government or regional governance system exists for CWQ, regional governance is an *emergent property* of this complex multi-layers system of nested and sometimes overlapping relationships.

In sum, regional governance in CWQ is *complex, relational* and *ad hoc* and supported by only weak regional institutional frameworks. As an emergent property of the diverse array of regional structures, processes and relationships, the key characteristics of regional governance in CWQ can be summarised as:

- Structurally both *multi-layered* (federal-state-regional-local/community) and sectorally ‘*nested*’ within the broader array of state and federal institutional arrangements operating at non-regional (e.g. national, state and more local) levels;
- *Complex mix of institutional forms/modes of governance* (e.g. traditional hierarchies, networks, centrally-orchestrated multi-stakeholder collaborations, public-private partnerships or alliances, and voluntary self-organising coalitions/partnerships);
- *Increasingly involving a number of regional partnerships or multi-sector entities* with growing importance in the region;
- *Predominantly sector-based* but expanding to encompass some inter-sector or issue-based regional initiatives (e.g. for tourism; sustainable regional development, NRM)
- *Needs-driven coordination within state government at the regional level* rather than being proactive process, such that links exist between state government agencies, but not much more.
- *Emergence of federal initiatives that are funding rural communities directly* – that is, they largely by-pass state government or involve its reluctant cooperation (e.g. regional development, NRM, health, transport);
- *Relationships built over years amongst both individuals and institutions* are very important (e.g. for building trust and understanding) for regional governance in the absence of stronger and more formalised regional structures.

In a recent study of regional development policy in Germany, Bocher (2008) identified four key characteristics of contemporary ‘regional governance’ all of which have some

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expression to a greater or lesser degree in the emergent system of regional governance in CWQ, namely:

- *Increasing self-governing responsibilities of regions* (i.e. an increase in the region's self-steering abilities and regional governance no longer a task solely for the central state by using direct interventions or regulations);
- *Replacing the principle of territory by one of function* (i.e. the region is determined by the density of social relations; and the function of the region is central - not just its geographical or administrative boundary);
- *Inter-sectoral co-operation through regional networks and partnerships* (i.e. networks and co-operation through private and public actors, joint visions, and inter-sectoral collaboration); and
- *Hierarchical steering of incentives through various instruments and forms* (e.g. competition as an instrument to identify and support best practices; financial incentives through funds with preconditions; and Increasing the importance of evaluations).

It can also be said that in CWQ there has been a shift away from traditional top down hierarchical control of a static administrative space or territory based on direct interventions or regulations to include arrangements and initiatives supporting community based or self-organising partnerships and regional cross-sectoral co-operations or alliances. Significantly, the strength of regional governance in CWQ lies in the dynamic, relational and responsive nature of these partnerships, collaborations and networks that are collaboratively involving public, private and voluntary sectors in the development and implementation of local and regional policies. This is particularly the case for regional development, natural resource management, tourism and community health sectors. Government however remains a vital part of regional governance in rural CWQ.

Notwithstanding, there are some significant challenges for effective regional governance that participants of this study identified including the limitations that flow from lack of resources, fragmentation, misaligned agendas, changing roles, blurred spatial boundaries, unstructured communication channels, remoteness of policy-makers and inadequate regional autonomy. These are discussed in more detail in Brown and Bellamy (2009).

THE QUEST FOR LIVEABILITY AND SUSTAINABILITY IN RURAL AUSTRALIA

Focused on rural and remote Australia, this paper has confirmed firstly the significance of the 'region' as a spatial governance unit and, secondly, the complex relational, ad hoc and emergent nature of 'regional governance'. However we find regional governance is supported by only weak regional institutional frameworks and blurred spatial boundaries; most commonly through decentralisation of policy administration but increasingly through both public policy design to the regional level and the emergence of complementary self-organised 'bottom up' regional collaborative initiatives involving a diverse mix of private, public and charitable sectors. Government at all level however remains a vital part of regional governance.

We locate the strengths of regional governance as including the dynamic, relational and responsive nature of partnerships, collaboration and networks involving public, private and voluntary actors in the development and implementation of local and regional policies. These findings supports recent propositions in the literature (e.g. Jordan *et al.* 2005; Bocher 2008; Bell and Hindmoor 2009; Rauschmeyer *et al.* 2009) that to be effective regional policy requires a mix of hierarchical top-down co-ordination and bottom-up processes that complement each other in practice.

Finally we argue that the emergent layer of regional governance identified for CWQ addresses to some limited degree each of Dietz *et al.*'s. (2003) three principles for robust regional governance, namely: analytic deliberation (i.e. dialogue through partnerships, collaborations and networks involved in developing and implementing local and regional policies); nesting (i.e. authority allocated to allow for adaptive governance at multiple levels from local to national through institutional arrangements that are complex, redundant and nested in many layers); and institutional variety (i.e. evidence of mixtures of institutional types (e.g. hierarchies, market-based forms of resource allocation and community self-organisation). In so doing, the emergent layer of regional governance in CWQ has the potential to continue to evolve and enhance regional capacity to adapt to change and support a more liveable and sustainable regional community.

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