

## **COMMUNITY EXPECTATIONS FOR THE ROLE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT IN REGIONAL AUSTRALIA: MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF ‘SLOW BURN’**

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**ABSTRACT:** Regional Australia is confronted by specific demographic, social, economic and infrastructure challenges, which we are denoting as ‘slow-burn’ threats. This article interrogates a recent national survey concerned with the value of local government to Australian communities, focusing upon differences in responses for regional and remote areas compared to those from urban capital cities. Findings indicate that regional and remote residents place more importance on local government delivering services that specifically focus on the long-term development and sustainability of the community than their urban counterparts, particularly economic and community development roles. We argue that this constitutes a demonstration of the different expectations that regional and remote communities have of local government in the face of ‘slow burn’ in regional and remote areas. Further, we suggest that the relationship between local governments in regional Australia and the communities they serve is usefully conceived in terms of what we denote as ‘the close economy’ and ‘the local state’.

**KEY WORDS:** Close economy; local government, local state, regional development, slow burn threats.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Regional and remote communities in Australia are exposed to unique challenges that are different from those faced by their metropolitan counterparts. The Australian Government's *State of Regional Australia 2015* (DIRD, 2015a) identified variable trends in population growth rate, demographics, labour force participation and economic wellbeing in regional and remote communities compared with metropolitan cities that reinforce the distinction between these long-standing spatially differentiated classifications. One way of conceptualising these trends is as them representing 'slow burn' threats to regional and remote communities. Slow burn threats are those that have an incremental, yet steady and detrimental impact over time (Pendall *et al.*, 2010). The potential for slow burn threats to result in a decline in Australia's regional and remote communities is widely recognised in the academic literature: A comparatively low economic growth rate, combined with an ageing population (Smailes *et al.*, 2014; Wilson, 2015), difficulties in attracting and retaining skilled staff (McKenzie, 2011) and the potential reduction in dominant industries such as agriculture and mining (Charters *et al.*, 2011) have all been identified as potential risks to the long-term sustainability of these communities.

Against this backdrop, which (arguably) is largely conceived in economic terms, local government fulfils a series of vital roles across Australia. As the third tier of the Australian polity, local governments are focal points of representative and participatory democratic processes and deliver a diverse range of services (DIRD, 2014). This is particularly the case in regional, remote and very remote communities, where local governments may comprise the only palpable form of government and as such are responsible for the delivery of a diverse range of services (Blackwell *et al.*, 2015; Dollery *et al.*, 2010) frequently on behalf of higher tiers of government (see, for example, Grant *et al.*, 2011).

While it might be tempting to juxtapose economic activity on the one hand with government *writ large* and local government in particular on the other, it ought to be recognised that local governments are also a significant component of the national economy. For instance, the sector expends over \$30.5 billion annually and is responsible for assets valued at approximately \$349.79 billion (DIRD, 2014: 11). Further, local governments employ over 195 000 people, many in regional, rural and remote areas of Australia, where they often comprise between 10 to 20 per cent of the total workforce (Hastings *et al.*, 2015: v).

It thus is imperative for us to understand the optimal role of local government in regional, remote and very remote settings in Australia. While attempts at determining this can be derived from *a priori* theorising (see, for example, Sorensen and Epps, 1993; Hearfield and Sorensen, 2009) our central concern in this discussion is to probe how communities in these contexts perceive the roles of local government in these settings compared with their urban counterparts. Can any differences in the conception of the value and role of local government between these different groups be understood to relate to the specific demographic, social, economic and infrastructure ‘slow burn’ threats to regional, rural and remote communities? In what ways can community preferences for the role of local government in their local area inform discussions about local governance and local development in Australia’s regions, when set against the same in urban contexts? In seeking to understand the differences in attitude toward this range of understandings, our work is akin to that conducted in both the Australian and international contexts (see, for example, Elton Consulting, 2010; Gray and Brown, 2008; Glaser and Denhardt, 2000; Ipsos Social Research Institute, 2010; Basáñez, 2016; Inglehart and Welzel, 2005).

This paper is divided into six main parts. Following this introduction, section two examines indicators of slow burn threats in regional and remote communities. Section three details the theory and methods of the ‘Why local government matters’ survey conducted by the Australian Centre of Excellence for Local Government (ACELG) from which data for this article was derived. Section four interrogates the results concerning community attitudes to governance, service delivery, place attachment and the role of local government; examining the results to determine differences between the responses from regional and remote residents compared with their metropolitan counterparts. Section five discusses the results, focusing specifically on aspects of the role of local government that relate to resilience to slow burn threats. The article concludes in section six by interpreting the findings more broadly, arguing that the dual ideas of ‘the close economy’ and ‘the local state’ are useful in framing comparative discussions of local governance and local development in Australia’s regions when set against the same in urban contexts. We sketch the implications for local government and public policy in regional areas in this regard.

## **2. BACKGROUND/CONTEXT**

### ***Slow Burn Threats to Regional and Remote Communities in Australia***

The phrase 'slow burn' has been widely deployed to refer to an assortment of slow or gradual occurrences (see, for example, Warburton, 2009; Weston, 1998). However, it was Pendall *et al.* (2010) who initially discussed slow burn in relation to regional resilience, concurring with other deployments of the term in differentiating slow burn events from sudden shocks, with the former having a gradual yet steady impact that may affect the particular system under examination over time.

We concur with Pendall *et al.* (2010) that the concept of slow burn threats is pertinent for describing the socio-economic situation of regional and remote Australia, albeit unevenly. The argument that Australia's regional and remote communities are in long-term decline is relatively commonplace across a range of academic literatures and public policy discourses. For instance, from the perspective of economic history, the dominance of agriculture was challenged as early as the severe depression and banking collapse of the 1890s and the ensuing growth of domestic manufacturing under the 'labour-protectionist' policies of successive governments up until the second Whitlam Government 1972-75 (see, for example, Lloyd, 2003). Similarly, political economists have documented the capital concentration of Australian agriculture from the 1970s, with the number of family farms estimated to have declined from 250 000 in 1970 to 70 000 in 2000 (Davidson and Grant, 2001) and the subsequent deployment of rural adjustment schemes, again by governments of differing political persuasions (Cockfield and Botterill, 2006).

Alongside the effect of the deregulation of commodity production in the Australian economy generally, variable climatic conditions have always played a hand in the buoyancy of rural and regional economies. For instance, much of the south eastern areas of Australia experienced prolonged drought conditions that began in 1996 and lasted almost a decade and a half (Australian Emergency Management Institute, 2015). This had a significant impact on the economic gains in the farming industry during this period (ABS, 2006). There is a steady migration of young people from regional and remote areas into metropolitan areas as they leave school and look for employment (Hillman, 2007). As a consequence, rural and regional areas are characterised by ageing populations that may diminish overtime.

More recently, over the last decade the mining boom counteracted a number of these issues across a diverse range of regions nationally, principally in Western Australia, Queensland and New South Wales (NSW) (see, for example, Hajowicz *et al.*, 2011) as well as in some very remote areas (Blackwell and Dollery, 2013). However, the fall in commodity prices globally has led to a softening of investment in resource extraction, with some regions now reverting to agricultural commodity production as their principal industry (see, for example, McFarlane *et al.*, 2016). These trends indicate that the long-term viability of regional and remote communities is at risk.

The conclusion that the future of regional, rural and remote Australia is shrouded in uncertainty is further supported by the Australian Government's *State of Regional Australia 2015* (DIRD, 2015a). This report analyses the spatial variation in data across key demographic, economic, social, and infrastructure indicators to capture systemic change in regional Australia. The findings document a decline in the engagement of young people in full-time work or study as remoteness increases, as young people move to metropolitan areas to increase their opportunities. Regional areas also tend to be poorer with both lower median incomes and lower income disparity. While mining centres in regional areas are an exception, the reliance of remote and very remote communities on the mining sector for employment and income also renders them vulnerable to structural change and commodity prices. This is of particular concern as the mining sector has been in decline over the last two years and is likely to continue (DIRD, 2015a: pp. 35, 61, 83).

Against this rather gloomy portrait, some evidence suggests that there are higher levels of social engagement and connectedness in regional areas compared to major cities (DIRD, 2015a: p. 85). However, as argued by Pendall *et al.* (2010) slow burns tend to erode regional unity. If the impact of an ageing population and reduced economic wellbeing increases, this may have a negative impact upon the level of social engagement and connectedness in these communities. In addition, physical and mental health outcomes are poorer in regional and remote areas than major cities, with lower life expectancy, reduced rates of physical activity and a higher incidence of suicide (DIRD 2015a: p.85).

### **3. SURVEYING ATTITUDES IN THE COMMUNITY ON THE VALUE OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

The social research project *Why Local Government Matters*, was developed in 2013 to investigate the social context for interactions

between Australian communities and their local governments (Ryan *et al.*, 2015). The ongoing research project investigates community attitudes and values in the areas of governance, place attachment, service delivery preferences and the role of local government. This includes local government's role in addressing slow burn threats such as local economic and community development, responding to ageing populations and supporting social cohesion. A national survey was undertaken in late-2014 as Stage One of the project. Currently qualitative data is being collected across a range of local government types in states and territories across Australia.

### ***Conceptual Framework***

The development and refinement of a conceptual framework for the research project involved an extensive literature review, consultation with the local government sector and a steering group of research staff and associates (Ryan *et al.*, 2015). Based on this work four key areas of enquiry emerged:

1. Local government's role as a 'place shaper' and its importance in meeting the needs of citizens that drive attachment and satisfaction with the area in which they live;
2. The preferences of communities for how their services are delivered at the local level and the ability of local governments to offer flexible and community specific service delivery;
3. Theories of governance, particularly community beliefs concerning large versus small government and its role in the market; the appropriate role for the private sector in local service provision, the preferred extent of public participation in government decision-making, and preferences for the realisation of public value, and
4. Community knowledge of local government, the ranked importance of services that can be delivered by local government in different jurisdictions, and attitudes about amalgamation.

As an element of the overall empirical strategy of the research project, the attributes of individuals that were theorised to influence their attitudes and beliefs about each of the areas above were incorporated, inclusive of

demographic factors, levels of community participation, personal values, political leanings and type of local government area in which the respondent resides (Ryan *et al.*, 2015).

### ***Methods***

Over six weeks in October and November 2014, computer-aided telephone interviews of landline numbers, of an average length of 25 minutes, were conducted with 2 006 randomly sampled people aged 18 years and over from all states and territories (with the exception of the Australian Capital Territory which does not have local government). Quotas were set for six local government area types, outlined in Table 1, to allow for comparisons to be made between regional and remote areas; regional urban areas and capital city/urban development areas. Additionally, quotas were established to match the Australian population distributions for age and sex. Post-stratification weighting was employed to correct for a slight undercount in respondents aged less than 39 years and males (see Ryan *et al.*, 2015).

First, respondents were asked their level of agreement with a list of nine statements relating to the attachment they have to their local area, based on dimensions of emotional connection and sense of identity developed from the literature (see, for example, Stedman, 2003; Stephenson, 2010). Second, respondents were asked to rate the importance of, and alternatively their satisfaction with, infrastructure, available services and 15 other 'instrumental' features of place—the amenities that drive satisfaction with the area in which we live and have been demonstrated to be the most important triggers for people moving or aspiring to move to another area (e.g. Savage, 2010; Stedman, 2002). Third, we asked respondents to think about the role of government in service provision and give their level of agreement to 25 statements developed from the literature concerning different theories of governance and service delivery preferences (e.g. Bennington, 2009, Stoker, 2006; 2011; Watt, 2006). Fourth, we provided respondents with a list of 19 different activities that local governments can undertake and asked how important it is that local government provides each of these activities. Importance was measured on a 5-point unipolar scale and agreement and satisfaction on a 6-point Likert scale. The 6-point scales were administered using branching questions. A range of other questions relevant to the broader research questions were also fielded, but are not reported in this paper.

**Table 1:** Local government classifications.

<b>Label</b>	<b>Definition</b>	<b>Weighted Sample (% of total)</b>
Capital City	CC • Capital city local government area	11.1%
Urban Small/Medium	US • Part of an urban centre of more than 1 000 000 or population density more than 600/sq km • Population 20 000 to 70 000	19.5%
Urban Large/Very Large	UL • Part of an urban centre of more than 1 000 000 or population density more than 600/sq km • Population 70 001 to more than 120 000	11.9%
Urban Fringe	UF • 90 per cent or more of LGA population is urban • A developing LGA on the margin of a developed or regional urban centre	20.0%
Urban Regional	UR • Part of an urban centre with population less than 1 000 000 and mostly urban in nature • Population density more than 30 persons per sq km	18.5%
Rural and Remote	RR • A rural LGA with a population of less than 20 000 • Agricultural areas with population density less than 30 persons per sq km • Remote areas where less than 90 per cent of the LGA population is urban	19.0%

Source: Based on the Australian Classifications of Local Government retrieved from [http://regional.gov.au/local/publications/reports/2013\\_2014/INFRA2466\\_LGNR\\_2013-14.pdf](http://regional.gov.au/local/publications/reports/2013_2014/INFRA2466_LGNR_2013-14.pdf)

For this analysis, conducted using SPSSv.22, we considered the effect of a respondent's local government classification on each of the variables described above using the two-tailed *chi*-squared test of association, with  $p < 0.05$  as the cut off for statistical significance. This broad-ranging survey yielded a wealth of comparative data across the Australian Classifications of Local Government (ACLG) (for the full results see Ryan *et al.*, 2015). In the discussion below, by and large only statistically



significant associations are reported in relation to the differences between ACLG classifications relevant to the issues discussed in this paper.

#### 4. FINDINGS

##### *How do Regional, Rural and Remote Residents Feel about Where They Live?*

Respondents were asked to indicate their level of agreement to statements designed to measure the degree of emotional attachment to their local area. Table 2 summarises the results of one key question about place attachment, giving the proportion of respondents who reported strongly agreeing across the six categories of local government. Residents of rural and remote areas were considerably more likely to report strongly agreeing that they feel connected locally to friends and neighbours, compared with people living in capital city local government areas and the mean score for all ACLG classifications (49.9%, 38.2% and 43.5% respectively,  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 2.** Thinking About the Local Area in Which You Live, Do You Agree or Disagree with the Following Statements?

	CC	US	UL	UF	UR	RR	Total
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Strongly Agree</b>	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)
I feel connected locally to friends and neighbours***	38.2 (83)	38.1 (148)	45.5 (107)	41.6 (167)	46.5 (173)	49.9 (190)	43.5 (868)

Differences across local government classifications statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  \*;  $p < 0.01$  \*\*;  $p < 0.001$  \*\*\*. Source: the Authors

This supports the findings from the *State of Regional Australia 2015* report indicating that residents of rural and remote areas have stronger social connectedness than metropolitan residents.

##### *What Services and Facilities are Most Important to Rural and Remote Residents and are They Satisfied with Their Provision?*

So called instrumental dimensions of attachment are linked to the capacity of a place to meet residents' needs; it is a multidimensional

judgement about the quality of a setting which is often described as 'place satisfaction' (Stedman, 2002). Respondents were asked to rate first, the importance of each instrumental feature of place and second, their satisfaction with the provision of each in their local area. Table 3 summarises the results of four of the instrumental place attachment questions that relate to resilience to slow burn threats, providing the proportion of respondents who rated each as extremely important. The four services and facilities include supporting an ageing population as well as community and economic development.

Some instrumental dimensions of place attachment were reported as being more important to regional, rural and remote respondents compared to other Australians surveyed. Table 3 demonstrates that good home or aged care was approximately 50 per cent more likely to be reported as being more important for those in regional, and rural and remote areas compared with those from capital cities and small urban councils (31.8% and 30.2% compared with 20.5 and 21.9% respectively;  $p < 0.001$ ). In terms of those factors that are more directly related to economic wellbeing, good quality roads and bridges were slightly more likely to be reported as extremely important by those in rural and remote areas (39.6% compared with 32.6% nationwide;  $p < 0.001$ ).

Table 4 contains the results of three of the questions asking respondents to rate the level of satisfaction they have with the dimensions of instrumental place attachment.

Comparing the results presented in Tables 3 and 4, notable is that the respondents from regional and remote areas who attached a high level of importance to good quality roads and bridges were nevertheless far less likely to report being very satisfied with their provision (20.8% compared with 31.7% nationwide;  $p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, a positive economic outlook was reported as more important to respondents in regional, and rural and remote areas compared with those from capital cities and small urban councils (33.5% and 32.4% compared with 24.9%, 26.2% respectively;  $p < 0.05$ ; see Table 3), yet these respondents reported somewhat lower levels of being very satisfied (rural and remote 16.0% compared with 21.3% nationwide;  $p < 0.001$ ; see Table 4).

**Table 3.** Thinking About the Local Area in which you Live, How Important are each of the Following to You?

<b>Extremely important</b>	<b>CC % (n)</b>	<b>US % (n)</b>	<b>UL % (n)</b>	<b>UF % (n)</b>	<b>UR % (n)</b>	<b>RR % (n)</b>	<b>Total % (n)</b>
Availability of good home or aged care***	20.5 (45)	21.9 (85)	28.9 (68)	28.4 (114)	31.8 (117)	30.2 (114)	27.3 (543)
Good quality roads and bridges***	22.4 (50)	24.7 (97)	30.8 (73)	37.9 (152)	34.9 (130)	39.6 (151)	32.6 (653)
A positive economic outlook*	24.9 (54)	26.2 (101)	27.1 (64)	30.5 (121)	33.5 (124)	32.4 (122)	29.6 (586)
Job opportunities***	24.3 (54)	23.5 (91)	28.7 (68)	32.9 (131)	33.3 (123)	28.0 (106)	28.8 (573)

Differences across local government classifications statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  \*;  $p < 0.01$  \*\*;  $p < 0.001$  \*\*\*. Source: the Authors

**Table 4.** Thinking about the Local Area in which You Are Currently Living, Are You Satisfied or Dissatisfied with the Provision of Each of the Following?

<b>Very Satisfied</b>	<b>CC % (n)</b>	<b>US % (n)</b>	<b>UL % (n)</b>	<b>UF % (n)</b>	<b>UR % (n)</b>	<b>RR % (n)</b>	<b>Total % (n)</b>
Good quality roads and bridges***	31.8 (70)	45.5 (178)	35.6 (85)	28.3 (113)	29.4 (108)	20.8 (79)	31.7 (633)
A positive economic outlook***	20.4 (43)	27.0 (98)	30.4 (69)	16.8 (65)	20.7 (74)	16.0 (59)	21.3 (408)
Job opportunities***	21.1 (41)	21.0 (65)	17.3 (36)	10.5 (37)	9.1 (30)	12.7 (43)	14.5 (252)

Differences across local government classifications statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  \*;  $p < 0.01$  \*\*;  $p < 0.001$  \*\*\*. Source: the Authors

Continuing with our comparison of the results in Tables 3 and 4, residents of regional, and rural and remote areas also reported somewhat higher levels of importance for the availability of job opportunities, particularly respondents in regional areas compared with the national average (33.3% and 28.8% respectively;  $p < 0.001$ ). However regional respondents and those from rural and remote areas were half as likely to report being very satisfied with the availability of job opportunities compared with respondents from capital cities and small urban councils (9.1% and 12.7% compared with 21.1%, 21.0% respectively;  $p < 0.001$ ).

***Who has the Knowledge to Make Decisions about Services in the Local Area?***

Respondents were then asked a series of questions about the role of government in service delivery and governance. For the majority of questions, people living in regional, rural and remote areas shared similar attitudes to those living in the more metropolitan areas. However, there were two related questions for which the type of local government area made a significant difference to respondents' agreement with the statement. Table 5 shows the proportion of respondents from each local government area that reported strongly *disagreeing* with the statement that people who work in government have enough knowledge to decide what services are needed in my area. People in regional, and rural and remote areas were approximately 50 per cent more likely than those in capital city, urban small and urban large areas to strongly disagree that governments have enough knowledge to make decisions about local services (32.0% and 31.6% compared with 20.8%, 22.8%, 22.1% respectively;  $p < 0.01$ ). However, it is worth bearing in mind that this question did not direct participants to reflect upon local government specifically and as such high levels of disagreement might reflect dissatisfaction with state and/or federal government.

**Table 5.** Thinking about the Role of Government in the Provision of Services to the Community, Do You Agree or Disagree with the Following Statements?

	CC	US	UL	UF	UR	RR	Total
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Strongly disagree</b>	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)
The people who work in government have enough knowledge to decide what services are needed in my area**	20.8	22.8	22.1	29.9	32.0	31.6	27.4
	(45)	(84)	(50)	(118)	(117)	(119)	(533)

Differences across local government classifications statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  \*;  $p < 0.01$  \*\*;  $p < 0.001$  \*\*\*. Source: the Authors

On the other hand, as seen in Table 6, when asked their level of agreement with the statement that communities know enough to make good decisions about what services they need, residents in regional, and rural and remote areas were more likely to report strongly agreeing with the statement, compared with those in capital city and urban small areas (36.2% and 34.7% compared with 22.3% and 23.6% respectively;  $p < 0.001$ ).

**Table 6.** Thinking about the Role of Government in the Provision of Services to the Community, Do You Agree or Disagree with the Following Statements?

	CC	US	UL	UF	UR	RR	Total
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
<b>Strongly agree</b>	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)	(n)
Communities know enough to make good decisions about what services they need***	22.3	23.6	33.9	29.7	36.2	34.7	30.3
	(49)	(89)	(75)	(115)	(130)	(129)	(587)

Differences across local government classifications statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  \*;  $p < 0.01$  \*\*;  $p < 0.001$  \*\*\*. Source: the Authors

***What Are the Important Things That Local Government Should be Doing?***

Respondents were asked how important it is that local government plays a role in delivery of a broad range of nineteen infrastructure and service items. Responses did not vary significantly across local government types in eleven of these, namely: water, sewage, stormwater and drainage; parks; footpaths; cycleways; land use planning and development applications, street cleaning and waste management, health and environmental management, child care; libraries, sporting and recreational activities; and arts and culture. However, as illustrated in Table 7, residents in regional, rural and remote areas were more likely to report the role of local government as extremely important in the remaining eight areas.

Arguably, each of these areas may assist in building resilience to slow burn threats that we identified in our earlier discussion. Vital in the aging communities of 'the bush', local government participation in aged care is more likely to be reported as extremely important in regional, and rural and remote communities compared particularly with capital city areas (29.3% and 28.1% compared with 13.4% respectively;  $p < 0.001$ ). Similarly, in the area of youth services (which may be understood to reduce the incentive for young people to leave), local government participation was more likely to be reported as being extremely important by residents of regional, and rural and remote areas compared with those in city, urban small and large areas (26.6% and 26.9% compared with 20.7%, 21.3%, 22.6% respectively;  $p < 0.001$ ). Regional, and rural and remote residents were also slightly more likely to see a role for local government in community development—maintaining and strengthening community wellbeing—compared with residents of city, urban small and large areas (27.4% and 27.7% compared with 23.4%, 22.3%, 22.1% respectively;  $p < 0.05$ ).

**Table 7.** I'm Going to Read Out a List of Different Things That Local Governments Can Do. How Important is it to You That Local Government Does Each of These Things?

<b>Extremely Important</b>	<b>CC % (n)</b>	<b>US % (n)</b>	<b>UL % (n)</b>	<b>UF % (n)</b>	<b>UR % (n)</b>	<b>RR % (n)</b>	<b>Total % (n)</b>
Roads and bridges***	23.4 (52)	19.4 (75)	26.9 (64)	31.5 (125)	34.6 (128)	33.2 (126)	28.6 (570)
Aged care***	13.4 (29)	21.1 (81)	25.7 (61)	29.2 (115)	29.3 (107)	28.1 (106)	25.3 (499)
Economic development***	16.4 (36)	19.0 (72)	20.3 (47)	23.3 (92)	26.9 (99)	24.0 (91)	22.2 (437)
Promoting the benefits of the local area***	16.4 (36)	20.9 (81)	19.7 (47)	22.4 (89)	28.6 (106)	28.8 (109)	23.5 (468)
Community development*	23.4 (52)	22.3 (85)	22.1 (52)	29.0 (115)	27.4 (101)	27.7 (104)	25.7 (509)
Youth services***	20.7 (45)	21.3 (82)	22.6 (54)	29.5 (116)	26.6 (98)	26.9 (101)	25.1 (496)
Health and environmental management*	31.7 (70)	29.6 (115)	35.3 (84)	36.0 (143)	38.8 (143)	38.8 (147)	35.2 (702)
Emergency and disaster management***	35.5 (78)	35.3 (136)	34.2 (81)	47.6 (191)	43.9 (162)	44.1 (167)	40.9 (815)

Differences across local government classifications statistically significant at  $p < 0.05$  \*;  $p < 0.01$  \*\*;  $p < 0.001$  \*\*\*. Source: the Authors.

Residents of regional, and rural and remote areas were also more likely to report that a role in economic development is an extremely important role for local government compared with those living in capital city, urban small or large areas (26.9% and 24.0% compared with 16.4%, 19.0% and 20.3% respectively;  $p < 0.001$ ). Even more so were regional, and rural and remote residents likely to report the importance of a role of local government in promoting the benefits of the local area compared with capital city, urban small and large area residents (28.6% and 28.8%

compared with 16.4%, 20.9% and 19.7% respectively;  $p < 0.001$ ). Roads and bridges—crucial transport infrastructure—were much more likely to be reported as extremely important responsibilities of local government by residents of regional, and urban and remote localities compared with those living in capital city or urban small areas (34.6% and 33.2% compared with 23.4% and 19.4% respectively;  $p < 0.001$ ).

Finally, health and environmental management was more likely to be reported as an extremely important role for local government by regional, and rural and remote residents compared with those in capital city and urban small councils (38.8% and 38.8% compared with 31.7%, 29.6% respectively;  $p < 0.05$ ), as well as emergency and disaster management (43.9% and 44.1% compared with 35.5%, 35.3% respectively;  $p < 0.001$ ).

## **5. DISCUSSION**

Taking one step back from the details of the data discussed above, it is possible to posit four general statements concerning the broad categories of inquiry examined in this context. First, the data from Table 2 suggests that residents in regional and rural and remote areas have higher levels of place attachment, as measured by their reported connection to their families and communities, compared with their counterparts in large urban areas.

Second, reflecting upon the data concerning the importance of particular instrumental features of place, the results in Table 3 suggest that residents of regional, rural and remote communities are aware of and concerned about what we have labelled, the 'slow burn' threats faced by their communities. Compared to their counterparts in metropolitan localities, the provision of home and aged care, good quality roads and bridges, a positive economic outlook and job opportunities are extremely important to them. Further, as suggested by the results in Table 4, they are significantly less likely to be satisfied with how well each of these features in their local area.

Third, the data examined here suggest that residents of regional, rural and remote areas have different attitudes about the potential role of government generally, and local government in particular, in their communities compared with those living in other parts of Australia. When presented with a list of nineteen areas in which local governments around Australia can be active in their community, they are more likely than residents of metropolitan councils to think that local government involvement is important in areas related to economic development,



transport infrastructure, community health and wellbeing, and community development (see Tables 5, 6 and 7). They also attached higher levels of importance to the role of local government in community development. Arguably, each of these factors are vital components of resistance to ‘slow burn’ for rural communities; and it is in these areas that respondents identified the importance of local government involvement.

Fourth, regional, rural and remote respondents were more likely to think that communities themselves (rather than government) know enough to make good decisions about what services they need. However, this by no means ought to be taken to imply that regional and rural and remote communities regard themselves as being capable of independence from government. Rather, they are less likely than their metropolitan counterparts to view government as the source of ultimate authority with respect to decision-making.

Taken as a whole, the four observations derived from the data may appear to be non-revelatory in nature. For instance, that residents in regional and remote areas have greater attachment to their local communities than their city counterparts can be said to reflect most major theories of industrialisation (Durkheim; Marx, for example – see Morrison, 2006). Further, that a broader role for government is perceived as necessary in regional and rural and remote areas may also appear obvious in conditions where no other alternatives to government are readily available. Moreover, that this role is also deeper as well as broader, involving what, in the language of political economy, is described as state intervention into (very imperfect) markets – in terms of economic development, inclusive of advocating for the area and employment, for example, can be labelled as predictable enough.

However, to return to the question that we denoted as of vital importance at the beginning of this article, namely that of the optimal role of local government in regional areas, as perceived by people living in them – this affirmation by way of the method deployed here is an important confirmation of the findings of other approaches and affirms the structural description of regional and rural and remote communities derived by these other methods. To briefly recapitulate: Data from the *State of Regional Australia 2015* report indicated that regional and remote communities have a unique set of challenges and needs compared with urban capital city communities, particularly in resisting the contributors to what we, following Pendall *et al.* (2010), have identified as ‘slow burn’ threats. These include: slow population growth and aging populations, lower levels of economic wellbeing, and volatile or depressed labour markets. The data presented in this article confirms that

this structural interpretation conforms quite precisely to the perceptions of these communities. Additionally, the data show that these regional, rural and remote communities understand the necessity of local government provision of services promoting community cohesion and economic development to manage the demographic, economic and social challenges being faced.

## **6. CONCLUSION**

The future of rural, regional and remote Australia can be interpreted pessimistically, especially if based on sets of indicators commonly used to measure demographic change, economic and social outcomes, and infrastructure needs. In this paper we have presented findings from the 'Why Local Government Matters' survey which report strong concern by regional communities for factors understood to be the 'slow burn' threats to their communities, as well as a higher level of support for a role for local government in meeting these specific challenges when compared to the opinions of residents of metropolitan areas.

Communities across Australia reported similar views on the importance of local government performing traditional roles (such as water and sewage provision, land use planning, waste management, libraries and sporting and recreation facilities) and common contemporary roles (such as child care and arts and cultural activities). The significant differences between metropolitan and regional attitudes about the role of local government were around the roles most closely aligned to combating the 'slow burn' threats evident in regional communities. For people living in regional areas, it is even more important that local governments play a role in promoting social, community, economic, infrastructure and wellbeing outcomes.

This suggests that we posit two broad heuristics for thinking about the way that citizens in non-metropolitan Australia understand the relationship between local governments their communities, both empirically and ideally. The first of these heuristics is captured by the idea of 'the close economy': In essence, changes to economic wellbeing – and importantly, *potential* changes to this that are negative and conform to what we have denoted as 'slow burn' threats – are more keenly felt *and* anticipated by non-metropolitan citizens than their counterparts. The second of these understandings is captured by the idea of 'the local state'. This conceptualisation recognises that, generally speaking, non-metropolitan citizens in Australia have an interventionist view of the role

of government: Government *ought* to intervene in instances of market failure; it also *ought* to do more than this, specifically take a hand in promoting economic development. Somewhat ironically, this does not entail that local government, or indeed government more generally, is beyond criticism. Indeed, our results demonstrate that non-metropolitan citizens cast a critical eye over the activities of government. But this does not entail that, generally speaking, they think that it ought not to be interventionist.

This research points to several policy implications for local government. First, local government in non-metropolitan areas in Australia should aspire to be, in the words of Dollery *et al.*, (2006) ‘maximalist’. For instance, it should advocate for greater resources to increase capacity; it should demonstrably assist in economic development and it should willingly accept responsibility to provide services of other tiers of government when the opportunity arises (see also Grant *et al.*, 2016). Yes, the resourcing of this stance is problematic, but it is a maximalist stance, set against (for instance) adopting the rhetoric of ‘cost-shifting’ and resisting regionalisation in the name of entrenched interests of smaller rural councils, that is the critical point. Second, it ought not to discount the possibilities for innovation and economic development from the private sector and actively seek to work with these possibilities. Third, while fostering these possibilities may entail adopting a networking approach in terms of advocating for a particular region or locale, local government in non-metropolitan areas ought to recognise – and leverage – its role as government: i.e. as a single, multi-purpose agency, and as first among equals in regional rural and remote settings, as indeed ought higher tiers of government.

In asserting this, we ought to recognise that the proper role of local government ought not to be determined *only* by how people perceive its optimal role; nevertheless it is to recognise that these perceptions should play *a* role, as the work of the Australian Constitutional Values Survey clearly does (see for example, Griffith University, 2014). With this in mind further research currently being undertaken nationally by the ‘Why Local Government Matters’ project will collect qualitative data from regional and metropolitan locations around Australia in order to explore with more depth and nuance people’s preferences for the role of local government in their local community. Additional future research investigating regional and metropolitan expectations of government in other national and subnational jurisdictions would also be a valuable contribution in this area.

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