

Greening Australia

4 November 1998

Dr Neil Byron, Presiding Commissioner  
ESD Inquiry  
Productivity Commission, Locked Bag 2, Collins St East PO  
MELBOURNE VIC 8003

Dear Dr Byron,

Submission to the Inquiry into ESD by Commonwealth Departments and Agencies

A project concerned with the challenge of putting sustainable development into practice has just been completed by Greening Australia. The Sustainable Regional Development (SRD) project undertaken by John Dore, Jim Woodhill and Colma Keating has been an interactive study of 'regionalism' working with people around Australia who are attempting, by way of various initiatives to improve the community, economy and environment of 'their region'.

The project has partly been a stock take of the current status of SRD in Australia. It has identified a set of critical issues which need to be addressed if we are to build on current efforts and optimising the impact of SRD initiatives in the future.

Greening Australia has worked on the project in collaboration with the Australian Local Government Association, funded by the Commonwealth through the Department of Transport and Regional Services, and supervised by Environment Australia.

Following please find a very brief outline of the project objectives, the context of SRD initiatives, outputs and the identified critical issues which may assist your team in its thinking.

I would be pleased to discuss this subject further with either yourself and/or any of your inquiry team.

Yours sincerely

John Dore

*Sustainable Regional Development*  
Regionalism  
Sustainable Development  
Community, Economy, Environment

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## Background

A project concerned with the challenge of putting sustainable development into practice has just been completed by Greening Australia. The Sustainable Regional Development (SRD) project undertaken by John Dore, Jim Woodhill and Colma Keating has been an interactive study of 'regionalism' working with people around Australia who are attempting, by way of various initiatives to improve the community, economy and environment of 'their region'.

The project has partly been a stock take of the current status of SRD in Australia. It has provided an analysis and set of general recommendations of the requirements for building on current efforts and optimising the impact of SRD initiatives in the future. Greening Australia has worked on the project in collaboration with the Australian Local Government Association, funded by the Commonwealth through the Department of Transport and Regional Services, and supervised by Environment Australia.

## Objectives

The project had two main objectives:

improve the understanding of how to better integrate economic development and management of the natural environment in the pursuit of sustainable development;

enable the experiences and concerns of people working at the regional scale around Australia to be shared between regions and with policy makers.

## Contributors

The players in Canberra involved in funding/supporting regional initiatives ie. EA, DTRD, DPIE, LWRRDC, MDBC, ALGA.

The players in the States and Territories involved in various agency efforts.

People active in Local government.

People who are fired up, burnt out, frustrated, exhilarated, paid well, paid poorly or not paid at all - involved in regional initiatives as chairs, coordinators, facilitators, regional agency reps, community reps, or capital city based program managers. None of them wish to waste their time! They are involved in a host of usually responsible, generally committed, empowered or unempowered organisations which are often either setting up or winding down. If their organisations survive and get properly established, and do their strategic planning they then may or may not be around long enough for implementation, learning and adapting.

The people with whom we have had the most contact are involved in:

South-West and Great Southern (WA)  
Eyre Peninsula (SA)  
Launceston Tamar and North-East (Tas)

- Shepparton Irrigation (Vic) and Murray Irrigation (NSW)
- Albury-Wodonga (NSW ~ Vic)
- Greater Western Sydney (NSW)
- Cape York Peninsula (Qld)

Regional organisations (ROB) which have been involved include those with a specific economic, social or environment focus (eg. "development boards", "catchment managers", ACCs, ATSI Regional Councils etc..), as well as interesting hybrids such as Cape York Regional Advisory Group (Qld), Dawson Valley Development Association (Qld), Shepparton Sustainable Regional Development Board (Vic), Lake Eyre Basin Coordinating Group (Qld/NT/SA/NSW) and the TeamWest Steering Group in Western Sydney (NSW).

### *Greening Australia / Sustainable Regional Development*

#### *Context for ESD inquiry of Sustainable Regional Development initiatives*

Either in the 'case study search areas' or elsewhere, there are a couple of dozen efforts around Australia that we

found (or were directed to) which to a greater or lesser extent fit the bill as SRD initiatives ie. an explicit or

evolving focus on 'sustainability' at the regional scale. The list includes:

- Blackwood Adaptive Management (South-West WA)
- CHRRUPP - Central Highlands Regional Resource Use Planning Project (Qld)
- CYPLUS - Cape York Peninsula Land Use Strategy (Qld)
- Dorset Sustainable Development Strategy (Dorset Shire, Scottsdale, Tas.)
- Eyre Regional Development Board (Eyre Peninsula, SA)
- FNQ2010 (Far North Queensland)
- Gascoyne-Murchison (WA)
- Great Barrier Reef "Keeping it Great!" [marine regions]
- Murray Voice (Murray Irrigation)
- Northern Rivers Regional Strategy (Northern NSW)
- Rangeways (North East Goldfields WA)
- SCRIPT South Coast Regional Initiative Planning Team (South Coast WA)
- SEQ2001 (South East Queensland)
- Shepparton SRD Board (Shepparton Irrigation MDBC/DTRD case study)
- South-West Regional Environment Strategy (South-West WA)
- SunRISE21 (Sunraysia Irrigation MDBC/DTRD case study)

Team West (Greater Western Sydney) [metropolitan regions]

*[Two of most ambitious and highly resourced of the lot would be the Regional Forest Agreements process, and the Murray-Darling Basin initiative.]*

Noone is claiming that any of the above are perfect, however, collectively they represent a huge public/private/community/government investment in a 'sustainability quest' where the stakes are obviously high. Helping the players involved learn from their experiences and share their suggestions/challenges etc.... pays tribute to their efforts and makes economic, social and environmental sense!

The critical issues outlined on the next page have been derived from discussion with people in many different parts of Australia. The critical issues are not relevant only to Commonwealth departments and agencies, but they certainly are of relevance to these institutions, and hence the Productivity Commission brief.

### *Critical issues for Sustainable Regional Development*

#### Understanding the implications of sustainable development

The call for 'sustainable development' is now oft repeated. It means improving community well-being and economic opportunity whilst caring for the environment. The concept includes the target of maintaining and enhancing environmental quality and ecological integrity and not diminishing opportunities for future generations by thoughtless spending of natural capital endowments. SRD is simply 'sustainable development' principles being applied at the regional scale, where it is possibly best implemented. SRD should be paramount in the overarching thinking driving our regional management and development efforts, plans, initiatives and associated decisions. There is a need for a greater awareness and appreciation of unsustainable practices and systems. Some dominant assumptions, mindsets and paradigms need to be challenged. There is a need for a deeper understanding about sustainability and as this increases, to keep clarifying the vision and direction of SRD initiatives.

#### Developing and maintaining supportive institutional arrangements

All three spheres of government have a significant interest and stake in regional scale initiatives. However, the allocation of roles and responsibilities both between the different spheres of government and between government and Ros is often unclear, leading to tension and conflict which undermine the potential for improved cooperation. There is a need for an enhanced understanding by regional communities of our Federal system of government and a more comprehensive 'whole of government' policy regarding regionalism. This necessitates further reshaping of our institutions and concomitant clarification of powers, functions and linkages to make our system more compatible with SRD aspirations.

## Devolving responsibility and power

Often governments devolve ROs responsibilities without devolving the authority or budgets which would empower the ROs to successfully discharge those responsibilities. There is a significant difference between devolving responsibility and truly devolving power. ROs, and the communities they represent, are often surprised when they realise they have less real implementation power than they had thought. Governments and ROs need to be quite clear about their respective responsibilities and the extent of powers devolved to ROs (if any) so that there is no misunderstanding.

## Enhancing the capacity of regional organisations

Many ROs often lack the capacity to meet the demands and challenges of SRD. This is largely because they often have an ambiguous, contested mandate within the current structures of government. Where necessary, capacity should be enhanced by professional development, and more adequate resourcing in terms of people, finance, facilities and time. Continuity of efforts can only be assured by maintaining resources, for at least a reasonable period, thereby avoiding the disillusionment and energy-sapping associated with start-stop initiatives.

## Improving coordination

There remains a problem in many places with poor coordination between the different spheres of government, between different government agencies and between different ROs. This is widely seen as wasteful of resources, frustrating, and a major impediment to attainment of the community, economic and environmental goals of SRD. We need to improve coordination, so as to enable greater efficiency and integration.

## Enabling participation

Participation is widely championed, however, some fundamental questions need to be constantly re-examined. Which individuals and groups are included in our definition of 'the stakeholders' and 'the community'? And, what do we mean by 'participation'? It should be acknowledged that different people and groups have more or less confidence, capacity and power. Participation processes are often unclear and questionable. Does your definition of 'participation' mean consultation, 'insulation', tokenism or true empowerment of all stakeholders to meaningfully participate in an SRD process? Structures and resources are not always in place to enable equitable and informed participation by all. Also, it should be respected that active participation in SRD initiatives can have a high cost for people with many other family, business and community responsibilities.

## Improving knowledge systems

Decision making for SRD is highly dependent on quality social, economic and environmental information. It is necessary to integrate knowledge derived from many

diverse, valid sources (local and non-local community/academic/scientific/cultural) and to keep participants well informed. Often current systems of research, information gathering and analysis do not adequately meet these requirements. We need to improve systems for assembling, accessing and synthesising high-quality, current knowledge.

### Improving processes of adaptive management and social learning

A great deal has been learnt about strategic regional planning and decision making, community participation, program implementation and evaluation. However, the sophistication of these processes still falls short of what is required to match the complexity and conflicts of SRD. Specific attention needs to be given to developing improved processes of adaptive management and ensuring people in ROs and governments have the opportunity and the skill to learn from their experience.

### *Terminology*

Community	There is a great deal of debate about what constitutes 'community'. Here the term is used very generally to refer simply to the individuals and social groups who collectively make up the social groupings of a locality, region or nation. Use of the term is not intended to necessarily imply a sense of social cohesion or identity between those different individuals and groups, although this may exist. While the boundaries are blurred community is generally used to refer to individuals or social groups outside the formal structures of government.
Region	A geographic area usually smaller than a State/Territory but larger than a Local government area. Regions may be informally recognised, for example the Hunter Valley or the Eyre Peninsula. They may be administratively defined for particular purposes, such as regions of responsibility for government agencies, or they may represent a commonality of biophysical features (a bioregion).
Regional community	The community within a particular region. It generally refers to people who live, or who's livelihood is based, within a regional. However, it is important to recognise that people who have less direct connections with a region can also have a legitimate interest in what occurs in that region.
Regional organisations (ROB)	Organisations established at the regional scale to further the community, economic, or environment aspirations of people in that region. Examples include:

Commonwealth &/or State/Territory &/or Local government supported Regional Development Boards;

Regional natural resources management organisations. For example, SA Catchment Water Management Boards, Vic Catchment Management Authorities, NSW Catchment Management Trusts and Catchment Management Committees;

Regional coalitions of Local governments;

Regional employment and training organisations;.

Regional organisations created to assist Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander;

Hybrids of the previously mentioned organisations, or new organisations with a specific focus on multi-dimensional SRD. For example, Cape York Regional Advisory Group (Qld), Dawson Valley Development Association (Qld), Shepparton Sustainable Regional Development Board (Vic), Lake Eyre Basin Coordinating Group (Qld/NT/SA/NSW), TeamWest Steering Group in Western Sydney (NSW).

Regional initiatives	Projects, strategies and activities planned and implemented at the regional scale. Regional initiatives vary widely in their scope, level of integration, sources of funding and level of institutional complexity.
Regionalisation	Government administrative responsibilities being carried out on a regional basis with powers being devolved from central administration to regional managers.
Regionalism	Regional communities having greater power over decisions and actions that impact upon their region and their futures; the phenomena of increased attention to the regional scale, the funding of regional initiatives and the trend towards greater stakeholder participation in regional scale decision making.
Sustainable Development	Improving social well-being and economic opportunity whilst caring for the environment. This includes maintaining and enhancing environmental quality and ecological integrity and not diminishing opportunities for future generations by thoughtless spending of our natural capital endowments.

Sustainable  
Regional  
Development  
(SRD)

Sustainable development or ESD principles applied at the regional scale. That is, working to improve outcomes for the regional community, economy and environment, in an integrated way.