

Rethinking the future of northern Australia's regions: more than mines, dams and development dreams

Background Briefing

'Rethinking the future of northern Australia's regions: more than mines, dams and development dreams' is designed to enhance the current debate on the pathways to success for northern Australia, taking a fresh perspective on population growth and economic development.

The paper seeks to promote wider discussion and consideration of core issues regarding sustainable development against the backdrop of the Australian Government's commitment to a white paper on northern Australia.

Data sources and analysis

The primary data source used in the paper is *[In]Sight – Australia's regional competitiveness index*, examining the seven Regional Development Australia (RDA) regions and 74 Local Government Areas (LGA) north of the Tropic of Capricorn.

Additional data is drawn from the ABS (2011) Census of Population and Housing.

The information and map in the infrastructure section was prepared for RAI by Parsons Brinckerhoff.

Consultation process

Draft research papers were circulated to stakeholders in northern Australia regions (government, regional planning and academic researchers) and stakeholders in policy areas related to regional planning, economic growth and industry development.

During the development of the report, open forums and/or policy roundtable discussions were held in Alice Springs, Townsville, Darwin, Kununurra and Port Hedland. Key ideas, concepts and preliminary research findings were shared at these events and feedback used to inform the final research paper.

Key Findings

The results show very clearly that infrastructure and human capital are the two most widely present and serious bottlenecks for growth in northern Australia, but the paper cautions against a blanket solution. Instead, it identifies three types of regions that need very specific development strategies:

1. Northern Cities - The large regional cities (Townsville, Cairns, Darwin, Mackay and Rockhampton) do not share the constraints of the north as a whole and are competitive in their own right. This is where significant growth is likely to occur over time in northern Australia regardless of the development approach taken by policy makers.

2. Industry hubs - Amongst the diverse mid-size towns of the north are a mixture of situations driven by location and key industry:

- Those places which lie in proximity to larger regional centres (Queensland Coast and near Darwin) have different opportunities because the barriers to further development are lowered by the existing concentration of people, infrastructure and other economic resources
- Mining centres feature some of the strongest economic fundamentals in Australia but their wider competitiveness profiles are often poor, emphasising how much of the boom's growth has been driven by outside resources and has not yet translated into broader, sustainable, long-term competitive strength for these regions
- Intensive agriculture regions (Queensland, Katherine and the Ord)
- Tourist hubs such as Broome, Alice Springs and Whitsunday.

3. The very remote pastoral areas and remote Indigenous communities which include many of the least economically competitive LGAs in the country. Government often dominates local employment in these regions and private sector investment is typically very low. To facilitate the economic and wider development of these very remote places, policy needs to firstly focus on resolving the complex impediments to using leasehold and indigenous land and water as a flexible economic asset. Reforming the governance of public investment to provide these remote communities with more responsibility and say over their future is also essential.

Approaches to development need to reflect the unique challenges within each of these three types of regions, as well as their opportunities. Many regions have thought hard about their options and are developing sophisticated development ideas. Our collective challenge is define an integrated suite of measures that stretch across regions, industry and geography to recognise the potential of different places and allow the people and communities in northern Australia to make the most of their potential.

Find out more

The full copy of 'Rethinking the future of northern Australia's regions: more than mines, dams and development dreams' can be downloaded through www.regionalaustralia.org.au/pressroom

More information on [In]Sight, the regional competitiveness index, can be found via www.regionalaustralia.org.au/insight

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