

Developing Policy for Australia's Small Towns: From Anthropology to Sustainability

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Abstract

Over the last three decades the way in which public policy analysts learn about the structure and function of Australia's small towns has shifted from the intensive, in-depth analysis provided by the anthropologist living in the community (called "community studies") to a more empirically oriented, demographic-based research carried out at a distance from these places (called "sustainability studies"). Rather than just understanding the functioning of small towns through case studies, recent research emphasis has centred on the more "aggregative" question of small town sustainability in all its forms. This alters the way in which small towns are viewed and complicates the current policy approaches to small town development and change. This paper identifies the two different methodologies implied by these divergent approaches and examines what this means to understanding of small towns and the policy implications that emerge. By reviewing the community studies approach to learning about small towns popular in the 1960s and 1970s, and contrasting this approach with recent, more aggregative approaches to learning about the sustainability of towns; this paper aims to find points of alignment and suggest a broader research framework that incorporates both approaches. This provides a comprehensive understanding of small towns, leading to a more effective development of public policies for these communities.

Introduction

Over the last decade there has been increasing interest in the future of Australian country towns and the role of public policy in these towns. As the population in these places typically age and decline, governments are faced with a range of questions relating to the provision of local infrastructure and services, especially health. One view is that there is an inevitable decline in most of these towns, reflecting long-term agricultural industry restructuring and subsequent demographic change. Equally there is another view that suggests rural town fortunes are related to intangible assets like leadership, change agents, capacity of local institutions, risk-minimising strategies, knowledge and community-based capacities.

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By understanding the forces that operate on small country towns, local communities and governments will be better able to develop actions and policies which can make these towns be resilient, more viable and sustainable. The contention in this paper is that a comprehensive integration of the community studies approach, pioneered by anthropologists and sociologists in the early post-World War II period; together with the sustainability-based approach of more recent demographic and economic analyses can enhance understanding of the dynamics of small towns and how to manage these places better. From this can develop more effective sustainability policies or determine that the town's existence is unviable with structural assistance packages provided to ease their disappearance.

As Ron Wild (1978b) noted in the reflections on his anthropological study of 'Bradstow', community studies in Australia was a relatively new field of research when he started his doctoral research in 1967. Governments did not have the evidence or research basis upon which to make equitable (rational) resource allocation choices. Since that time there has been a number of evidence-based formulae for allocating infrastructure funding (the Commonwealth and States Grants Commissions) as well as health and education funding. Such mechanisms draw upon two aspects of sustainability, demography and resource availability (called "capital"). The move has been from understanding communities through the curiosity and energy of the anthropologist and sociologist researching a narrow, or particular, aspect of community life; towards the aggregative broad sustainability studies with a strong public policy focus. This paper is interested in the shift of policy-making based on research about small country towns from the anthropological to the demographic/economic perspective. Methodological issues are strongly implicated in this shift of research about the nature of small towns (or the local government areas in which they are located); from mixed qualitative-quantitative participant observation to aggregated empirical analyses.

We first identify the problem with rural and regional research in the context of small towns and related public policy development. Then the nature of community studies on small towns (typified by Wild) and their methodological approach is identified. The focus is on how this social relationship-based approach affects the resource allocation issues of government in small towns. We follow with an examination of the way information is collected and analysed for the sustainability approach. The focus in this latter approach is on economic, social and environmental dimensions to resources in small towns. Our view is that there is place for both approaches – need to strike a balance between the two. We believe that each approach is complimentary, however governments have not quite worked out how to coordinate both and therefore neither approach currently leads to effective decision-making about the future of Australia's small country towns. The paper concludes with a clear methodological research framework that aims to integrate both approaches, assisting in shaping future debate and studies on small town viability. Possible policy implications of this broader framework are briefly outlined.

The Public Policy Issue

People in small towns across Australia are connected via telephone, radio, television and the Internet to the same images and cultural icons as their city cousins. The differences between metropolitan and rural Australia are increasingly more evident to people in both places as communication has become more immediate and intensive. This is the basis for the observed increasing political concern. The demise of the Kennett Government was on the back of the rural vote that they had taken for granted for so many years. It was after major restructuring to local government, schools and health services that country people said enough and voted

the Bracks Labor Government into power, and they have remained vigilant to the rural vote with a range of pork barrelling initiatives in key locations to bolster their image as a party concerned with the bush. The recent media coverage to the allocation of funds out of the Commonwealth Government's Regional Assistance Program to the restoration of Tumbi Creek in the Wyong Shire on the NSW central coast is another example of political concern for non-metropolitan support (SMH, 2005). The examples outlined above emphasis the *ad hoc* nature of state and federal government policies towards Regional Australia.

Specifically, state and federal governments have generally not played a leading role in assisting to develop the capacity of small towns. Historically it has largely been left to the town itself to determine its long-term future. The perceived excesses of the Federal Whitlam Labor Government in the 1972-75 period ended the only coherent regional development policy at a national level, and even then, the small town was peripheral to the greater concern for decentralisation away from large cities towards large regional centres. When expansion out of the 1989-92 recession left Regional Australia behind, governments at all levels became concerned for their own political survival. Beer (2000, p. 169) identifies a raft of government taskforces and reports in the period 1993-96 that were strongly demographic based. Such interest by governments is neither comprehensive nor coherent, leaving many towns to their own devices. There is no "ministry for country towns", so development occurs through the ministries of transport, education, health and industries that see small towns as very peripheral to their major concerns in large populated centres. In fact, Beer (2000, p. 120) reviews public policies on local and regional development in the last part of the 20th Century as "...incapable of developing a set of long-term solutions to the problems of our regions." This concern is particularly apposite for small country towns.

Academic research on Regional Australia also responded to the lagged and extended recession in "the bush" with much vigour¹, but the issue of the small town was only part of a broader canvas that was demographic and rural crisis related. A series of academic studies in the early 2000s attempted to address the lack of public policy coherence through the concept of sustainability.² The future of small towns was first addressed directly in Rogers and Collins (2001). The conservative and non-interventionist perspective of the Howard Coalition Government forces specific rural initiatives to be left for state governments to manage in diverse and *ad hoc* ways. The need to develop policy for small town viability has not been greater.

Community Studies Approach

Australian studies on the nature of small towns and their viability have a long and distinguished tradition that tend to be ignored in the recent flurry of academic research, consultant reports and populist publications. The work conducted in the 1960s by anthropologist, Harry Oxley, and sociologists, Ron Wild, have important resonance in today's debates; both in the concepts studied and the methods employed to understand small town dynamics. A strong community studies literature followed in the 1970s that influenced the Whitlam Government and some progressive state governments on regional policy issues.

The mainstream sociological view on communities in the 1960s was that the outside influences were so great - with advances in technology, commerce and government administration - that communities were very dependent on external factors. One sociologist

¹ See Stilwell (1992), Sorensen and Epps (1993), Beer *et al.* (1994), Lawrence *et al.* (1996).

² See especially the "Sustainability of Australian Rural Communities" project and two books from this project: Cocklin and Alston (2003) and Cocklin and Dibden (2005).

reflected this view by referring to the eclipse of the community (Stein, 1960). This view is reflected in the 2000s by some researchers who recognise the decline of many small towns as inevitable, for it relates to long-term structural changes external to the town itself (see Forth & Howell, 2002). Wild, drawing on a deep anthropological perspective, challenged the mainstream with a study of the small town of Bradstow (Wild, 1978a) to show that essentially “community matters” when it comes to understanding the processes that determine the nature of the community in a small town. Wild saw communities themselves and their internal influences, in the form of social classes and status, as having a large role to play in determining behaviour and approaches in confronting local problems and issues. From this work by Wild, community studies in Australia shifted to this anthropological approach that required deep understanding of the processes going on in particular communities. This we call the “community studies approach”.

Many studies can fit into this community studies approach, from the pioneering work of Oeser & Emery (1954) on the Mallee wheat belt, Oxley (1978) on an inland industrial town, to Montague (1981) on a Queensland inland pastoral shire. Such studies affected the political arena in 1979 as Holmes (1979) expressed the concern that the Australian Labor Party had great difficulty in formulating a policy for country towns, given the type of social stratification that exist. This tradition of community studies has been continued in more recent times by studies from Gray (1991) and Tonts & Black (2003), where race relations add another dimension to the spatial class stratification.

Methodology of the community studies approach is what we want to focus on, and the Wild study is the best exemplar of this methodology. Wild chose Bradstow primarily because he “wanted a town that was a political unit at a local level rather than part of a wider entity such as a shire.” (Wild, 1978a, p. xi) It is clear that Wild wanted a close relationship between the geography of the town and the local system of government, such that his analysis would not be clouded with a shire council’s preoccupation with a number of towns. Wild was also candid enough to admit that he “selected Bradstow because I felt an empathy with the place I had not experienced elsewhere.” (p. xi) [in Australia, as he was born and raised in a manufacturing town in north Lancashire]. While we are arguing the basis for decision making about small towns in Australia has changed since Wild carried out his research on Bradstow, we still see such intuition in the selection of towns as worthy of receiving government support. The Victorian Government’s choice of ten towns in its Community Capacity Building Initiative for 2004-5 provided no plausible explanation as to why these towns were chosen. Any such rationale is important in conducting research into small towns.

As an anthropologist Wild, and his wife, lived in the town for two years while he developed relationships with a wide range of different types of people such that he felt he was able to gain reliable information from them via structured interviews. Wild (1978b) refers to Gans’s description of the three roles researchers play; total researcher, researcher-participant, and total participant. On reflection Wild could see that he was changing between roles depending on the circumstances he created, and found himself in. This distinction is helpful today as people work within their communities to affect change. Being able to determine just when one is in which role may lead to a better community understanding about how people work together to create effective change. Thus, although the community studies approach is largely descriptive and, by implication, had much less to say about the public policy implications of how such towns could be influenced to change. There is a need to develop greater understanding of the impact of government interventions across Australia today as populations in small towns age and decline, economic circumstances change more rapidly, and towns face disproportionate change.

At a pure methods level, Wild obtained his qualitative, indirect and subjective data while participating in the community and enabling him to appreciate "...the annual cycle of social events such a balls, festivals, and picnic race meetings" (1978b, p. 209). He added a quantitative, direct and objective method as necessary and complementary. This consisted of statistical evidence which identified social inequality, as well as a random sample survey that provided a "voice" to all the community, some of which is not seen in social and political events of the town. Wild saw the quantitative method backing up qualitative method. The challenge for policy oriented analysis that prevails in the 2000s is to determine how to incorporate the anthropological qualitative approach to the current demographic-based approach evident from government documents like *An Atlas of Regional Victoria* (Victorian Government, 2002). For communities to be best placed to respond to the formidable challenges before them, policy needs to understand the social and cultural dimensions of the town and its citizens. The balance between quantitative and qualitative methods will better assist in seeking appropriate strategies for towns to cope with change.

Finally, from a research perspective, the inclusion of the anthropological (community studies) approach into the central debates on small town resilience and sustainability will provide a rigorous ontology of behaviour in small towns. Our current ontology is based on the swag on studies in the 1970s and 1980s, with only a very small group of studies since then, notably Dempsey (1990), Gray (1991), Tonts & Black (2003). Ontology is "...the study (or a theory) of being or existence, a concern with the nature and structure of the 'stuff' of reality." (Lawson, 2003, p. 12) Any study or research of a concern has a metaphysical theory of ontology as a precondition to modelling and empirical validation, whether implicitly or explicitly stated. This is the foundation of all inquiry. Ontology illuminates the range of empirical phenomena that potentially can be investigated. When it comes to understanding small town behaviour, the ontology is poorly conceived or implicitly assumes the type of social stratification identified by community studies of 30 years ago. Human actions underlying how small towns function need explication since exogenous structural changes alter these small societies quickly. With no such explication, small towns can be portrayed as being totally at the mercy of exogenous forces, and little can be done at the local level except for the ameliorating support from governments far away from the small towns and who do not understand small town mechanisms for remaining resilient.

Gray (2005, p. 237) points out the danger of this lack of ontology, as interests of some clearly identifiable groups in small towns are ignored in local decision-making. By extension, these marginalised voices do not get heard when governments further away seek applications for funds and support of local community building activities. The epistemology that has been developed from the sustainability approach discussed below is undeniable, but without a rigorous ontology to underpin this epistemology, many policy decisions will exclude groups, activities and processes that are central to the resilience of small towns.

Sustainability Studies Approach

Economic and environmental sustainability have been the focus of much research in relation to specific regions. The vulnerability of small towns in the face of the exogenous structural changes described previously has led to the adoption of the sustainability term to social forces in communities. The implication from this approach is that communities have the potential to accumulate resources in a form that enables them to sustain their social existence. The "Sustainability of Australian Rural Communities" project, led by Chris Cocklin borrows its concept from the environmental sustainability literature, notably from work like Barbier (1989) who developed ecologically sustainable rules related to rates of both exploitation of natural resources and generation of wastes that specific ecosystems can assimilate for long-

term “carrying capacity” sustainability. Natural capital derived from the ecosystem can be run down if carrying capacity levels for sustainability are threatened.

Cocklin and Alston (2003, p.4) specify five “capitals” – natural, human, social, produced and institutional. The research agenda is based on measuring in some way the stocks of these forms of capital and determine whether over time these stocks “...are declining or growing: for example, a community in which the stocks of capital are running down might not be ‘sustainable’.” Missing from this analysis are community sustainable rules and threshold “carrying capacity” limits that would give a *relative* measure to declining or growing, rather than the simple *absolute* measure of declining and growing that is assumed in the Cocklin methodology. For example, a town might be declining in absolute capital stock, but the nature of the community processes and the established rules going on in the town may indicate that if the town became smaller, with a lower carrying capacity, its ability to be resilient and sustainable might in fact grow.

The way public policy makers see small towns today is influenced by constructs such as social capital and sustainability because they allude to the ecological concepts that have been developed in a very rigorous manner with clear ontological account of the endogenous forces within the ecosystem. This approach also encourages a demographic view in which the population of the town can be measured in some absolute terms to identify the various stocks of capital. In the context of social capital, for example, the stock may be growing in absolute terms, but the processes are mostly negative (e.g. strong criminal community). Unlike economic and natural capital; social, human and institutional capital can be negative. Social sustainable rules and carrying capacity limits related to these rules can only be understood from a deep anthropological view implicit in the community studies approach to small towns.

The international research on “New Regionalism” has also influenced the sustainability studies approach taken in Australia, despite many concerns about its appropriateness. “New Regionalism” (NR) also identifies the crucial importance of the concept of capital. Regions have embedded in them capital of many forms, but NR recognises knowledge, tacit skills and human investment as the ones that sustain a community as a social centre rather than just a factory (of produced capital) or a national park (of natural capital). Sustainability in NR relates to how such human and social capital can be created, supported and not “leaked out” leading to a situation that the region (or town) can successfully compete via leadership, clustering and innovation. Lovering (1999) identifies inadequate economic theorising in the NR research. For example, he notes that competitiveness is merely a trendy “add on” in the regional literature, rather than grounding such a concept into the economic and social structures of the regional community. Juniper (2004) has a critique which goes further, noting that NR ignores the issue of social exclusion, which can have significant negative effects on the embedded social capital. Social exclusion results in locational disadvantage for the small towns. Stilwell (2000, p. 257) points out that whereas, the more entrepreneurial people in these towns can leave, there is no such geographical mobility for the town itself. As local services close down and economic opportunities narrow, a downward spiral of economic multipliers and social capacity building ensue. These criticisms identify a need to examine the social processes embedded in the small town communities in an anthropological approach and not just in terms of social capital.

Research at a policy level reflects the demographic concerns of the sustainability views outlined above; identifying factors leading to decline such as population loss, job loss, business closures and diminution of public services.³ Policy alternatives have centred on

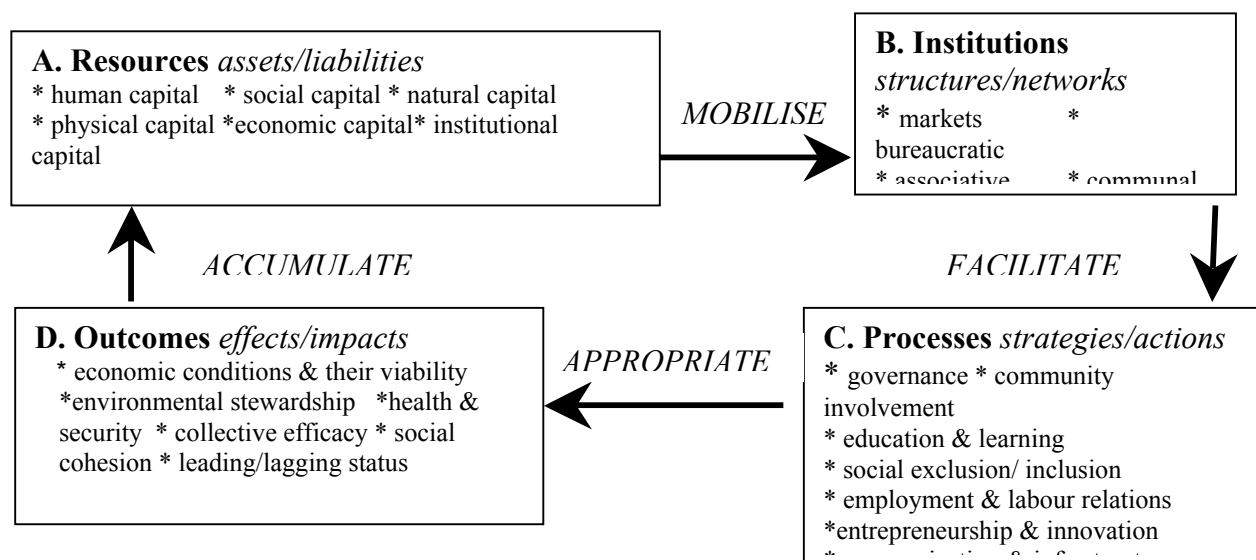
³ For example: McKenzie (1994), Wahlquist (1997), ABS (1998), National Economics (1998), AHURI (1999).

using elements like community learning (Kilpatrick, 2001), clustering (Lowe and Miller, 2001), leadership (Cocklin and Dibden, 2005) and innovation (Lyons, 2001) to build social capital. This is all quite acceptable as far as it goes, but does it go far enough? The question underlying these prescriptions is purely ontological, in terms of understanding the processes in a small town community that will produce and continue to reproduce these social capital elements. The neo-liberal economic orthodoxy has no problem with this question, it merely assumes that the market signals in the community will ensure they come forward; governments need to remove all impediments to market signals (like monopoly and monopsony controls by powerful interests, subsidies and other government hand-outs). NR advocates simply add on a level of government providing “lightly funded ‘remedial’ strategies” and incentives (Tonts, 2005, p. 211). Neither approach above tackles the ontological question of whether the small town has a community with endogenous forces that could sustain such behaviour long after the government representatives and their consultants are back in their inner city apartments.

Striking a Balance

The approach we advocate to overcome the problems identified in the sustainability studies approach is not to throw out this approach, but to enhance it by incorporating the anthropological approach. This is a way of striking the balance between deep (anthropological) and the broad (sustainability). Figure 1 below outlines the approach in detail, identifying the areas of research encompassed in the four boxes. We start in Box A with the capital stock concept as a basic quantitative measure of what exists on the surface of the community. The institutions within which these ‘capitals’ operate are in Box B. Then in the figure comes the deep understanding of processes, not as “add ons”, but as social processes of their own, independent of any ideological policy approach. Finally, the outcomes in Box D are identified and related to specific processes (or groups of processes). It is the success or failure of such outcomes that will affect the sustainability (or otherwise) of the resources in Box A.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Small Town Research



The Cocklin and Alston (2003) study identifies the resources communities need to ensure their sustainability (Box A). Using the sustainability approach, they conclude that such resources lead to outcomes (Box D) without saying just how these resources combine, noting at the end of their study of the need to identify and analyse processes (Box C) in more detail.

The Canadian New Rural Economy (NRE2) study (Reimer 2002) works through an analytical framework that begins with assets and liabilities (Box A), called community capacity, then specifies how structure and networks (Box B) lead to outcomes (Box D). The Canadian study includes a feedback mechanism, but does little to analyse the processes that enable these outcomes. The anthropological approach identifies and analyse the processes (Box C) that exist in small towns after profiling resources (Box A) that mobilise the institutions facilitating structures and networks (Box B). These institutions facilitate the processes that are appropriated as specific outcomes in small towns, and which lead to an accumulation of capital resources. This creates cumulative causation as the outcomes of one period lead to an accumulation of resources for the next period. This accumulation can be in negative terms (i.e. decumulation) for towns experiencing decline, or can be in positive terms (i.e. accumulation) for towns that experience economic and population growth.⁴

Given this research approach, rural town communities need to be understood by developing ways of working with them over a lengthy period of time that reflect the anthropological approach developed by Wild, in the context of the crucial processes in Box C. This can be supplemented by sophisticated social network analysis which identifies the dynamics of information flows in the particular communities investigated (see Wasserman & Faust 1999). Such research needs to be conducted across a number of small towns based around the same local government area, also based around the one state government area. Keeping government policies common over a few towns allows some relative comparisons to be made within and across different government precincts. The research outcome that is aimed to achieve is identification of generalised patterns of small town behaviour that relate to particular types of towns with particular recognisable characteristics.

A research strategy based on this conceptual framework aims to provide a deeper understanding of processes in small towns that explain how the stocks of capital vary and how that affects the resilience of the town to cope with external structural changes. The research framework is designed to look at small town dynamics (over time) incorporating complexity themes of carrying capacities and cumulative causation. The community studies approach provides the substrata upon which to build concepts of capital that can be altered over time by internal factors, as well as being driven by the inevitable external forces. The conceptual framework above aims to uncover how a small town responds to the external forces and how its own dynamics cumulatively alter over time.

Research outcomes from this framework, by providing general patterns of town processes, should assist governments at all levels, businesses and local community groups to identify what patterns their town reflects and what can be done to enhance (or ameliorate) particular actions and processes. Strategies based on rigorous research outcomes, and not *ad hoc* actions, can then be developed within these small towns with the assistance of the business community and various government bodies and authorities. Coordination of decisions and actions by all these different actors on the small town stage will be greatly enhanced. This then provides a comprehensive approach to the understanding of small towns, leading to more effective development of public policies and community action.

⁴ The authors are part of a team based in the five regional university campuses in Victoria, called VURRN (Victorian Universities Regional Research Network) which have applied for an ARC Discovery grant to take on this framework as a research project. The project will examine the way local institutions, public and private, working across portfolios (business, governance, finance, education, health, and so on), affect the sustainability of rural communities. Each university research partner will undertake an empirical analysis of three towns; similar in style to the Cocklin and Alston (2003) research, but with a more closely aligned methodological approach, using the Canadian NRE2 dimensions to examine associational and communal relations in the towns participating in the research, but widening the approach to include market and bureaucratic institutional relations.

Patterns identified from our research framework, could support the coherent development of a set of policy strategies and actions that already exist but little discussed and even less implemented in any systematic manner. The neo-liberal approach of allowing market forces to determine strategies in an *ad hoc* fashion tend to dominate as discussed early in relation to the NR approach. One excellent example of the alternatives that are possible is Falk (2001), which sets out a large number of new strategies that empower small communities to evolve through learning, trust and social cohesion. Quite clearly these strategies are interventionist in approach because they aim to develop learning approaches to managing change in local communities that have to cope with powerful external global forces. Thus, there are communities out there that are demanding the type of research framework and possible patterns emerging from such an approach.

Conclusion

Research is a question of balance. There is a need to be broad in an epistemic way, but there is also need to go deep into the ontological roots of the issue under research. In developing policy for small towns, research must strike a balance between these two approaches to ensure effective policies can be developed and supported. The community studies approach lacks a strong policy perspective, but does have a deep understanding of the forces operating within local communities. The sustainability studies approach has an explicit policy orientation and is broad in scope, but lacks a deep behavioural context. The research framework outlined in this paper is an explicit attempt to straddle the two small town research approaches used in Australia over the post-World War II period. Thus, the conceptual framework outlined above aims to identify generalised patterns of small town behaviour which influence the town's responses to external structural changes and also internal conflicts.

From these identifiable patterns emerge specific policies for each town that incorporates governments, business and the small communities themselves into developing learning strategies to manage fast altering structural and institutional forces. The anthropological perspective in the framework tackles the issue of who in the community is involved in the policy processes and their implementation, as well as whom in the community is left out. This enables any broad sustainable policy to be researched and developed with a view to empowering the community to manage change.

Without this framework, the power of local leaders and some businesses in the town lead to the overvaluation of their perspectives and aspirations within the policy development process, while devaluing and marginalising the aspirations of others in the town. This is evident in the Australian small town landscape. Through the Federal Liberal-National Coalition Government's support of neo-liberal policies that argue for efficient allocation of resources *via* efficient market signalling, marginalised communities in small towns face a difficult future. The viability of many small towns will be also threatened. The long incumbency of State Labor Governments throughout Australia has led to the "picking up of pieces" that fall through the Federal policy approach. The result is an *ad hoc* mosaic of policies that affect small towns in many conflicting ways, further exacerbated by the power of local politics. No clear strategies for learning and coping with change emerge in this climate. This is specifically what the research framework developed in this paper aims to address.

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