

Let's Hear It from the Board...

**An analysis of regional development governance in
Western Australia and New South Wales**

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University of New England**

Declaration

I certify that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not currently being submitted for any other degree or qualification.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge any help received in preparing this thesis and all sources used have been acknowledged in this thesis.

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Date

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List of Abbreviations

ABS	Australian Bureau of Statistics
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
DLGRD	WA Department of Local Government and Regional Development
DOTARS	Department of Transport and Regional Services (federal government)
DSRD	NSW Department of State and Regional Development
LFRs	Less Favoured Regions
NR	New Regionalism
NSW	New South Wales
RDA	Regional Development Agency
RDB	Regional Development Board
RDC	Regional Development Commission
ROC	Regional Organising Council
WA	Western Australia

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ABSTRACT

This research examines how board members of regional development agencies in Australia interpret and perform their governance role, and considers what this tells us about the nature of regional development governance. With no previous research into these women and men who accept appointment onto these boards, the board experience has been uncharted and board members invisible in their roles.

This research focuses on the boards of state government funded regional development agencies in two states, New South Wales (NSW) and Western Australia (WA). Board members of these agencies are ministerial appointees. Six boards were identified on the basis of geographically dispersed locations, three boards in each state. Fifty-three board members were interviewed (twenty-one women and thirty-two men) from these selected boards in primarily face to face, semi-structured interviews which allowed for issues to be explored during the interview. This research uses grounded theory to analyse the way in which board members describe their boardroom experience and board role to reveal patterns and variations in the way in which regional development governance is practiced.

A metaphorical quilt is constructed to portray the complexities and tensions in the way in which the board role is described. It became apparent that it is very difficult for these board members to make sense of their role, when the role of the agency and the board itself lacks clarity. Board members struggle to give meaning to the concept of regional development amidst competing regional development discourses and government priorities often seen by board members, to be designed by those outside of the region. While board members are generally not content with either the 'hands off' approach of current government policy or government priorities; they are loath to evoke public criticism of the system and be seen to 'bite the hand' that could feed their community with funding, or risk other benefits of membership. Board members describe a politicised appointment process, which is not transparent and confounds both accountability and legitimacy. Board members do not see themselves as part of a new order of New Regionalism. In contrast they see state government firmly steering the course for regional development, and attending to the needs of large scale capital. Despite the reluctance of the board to draw their own meaning of regional development, the political machinations, and concerns for adequate resources, there is expressed enjoyment in meeting with other

like-minded regional players. Board members acknowledge they have gained more from being on the board than they contribute. These board roles do not reflect a new order of inclusive practices for regional development as New Regionalism would suggest. Board members describe the weightlessness of their role in regional development governance, and yet continue to serve on these boards knowing that the big decisions for the region's development are not made within the board and generally not within the region.

This research identifies three major tensions for board members in the practice of these regional development governance roles. Firstly, board members are not able to create meaning for regional development within their region, in effect being positioned to respond to imposed priorities. Board members point to this disjuncture as a sense of uncertainty dominates the board experience. Secondly, despite the differences in the two state frameworks, politicisation of the appointment process and ministerial control over the activities of the boards is revealed as compromising the legitimacy and power of the board and indeed the agency, in the minds of board members. Finally, board members point to the importance of consensus and likeminded-ness on the board above dissent for other ways of operating. Deeper issues such as the domination of economic perspectives, inclusion, power and whose interests are being served by the work of the board are seen to be silenced.

The way in which regional development governance is being interpreted and performed in NSW and WA fails to provide 'good' governance of regional development. These governance arrangements are weak because the appointment process is largely politicised and the work of the board controlled and manipulated by government bureaucracy or ministerial interference. In effect without a major overhaul of the appointment process and the role of these boards in regional development governance, the work of these board members will continue to be regarded as ad hoc, invisible and their legitimacy questioned.