Examining communities of interest to achieve 'best-fit' governance in Central Queensland

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Abstract

Local government reform has been an important governance issue across Australia for many years. In 2007, in Queensland, concerns surrounding the economic viability of many local governments triggered a shift in the direction of the Size, Shape and Sustainability ("SSS") local government review. During the SSS process, the Institute for Sustainable Regional Development (ISRD) was commissioned to undertake a study on the implications of Council amalgamations for the Mt Morgan and Fitzroy local government areas in central Queensland: this paper describes this work and its relevance for regional governance.

A key aspect of the project was an examination of the 'communities of interest' within the study area. Communities of interest are an important consideration for local governments, particularly where boundary changes involve the amalgamation of previously separate shire areas and their respective communities.   The purpose of this research was to ascertain (a) what, and where, communities of interest existed within the Fitzroy-Mount Morgan study region and (b) the implications of these for the communities of interest post-amalgamation. The research involved a literature review combined with an extensive community consultation phase, including face to face interviewing and a community survey. A number of communities of interest were identified, particularly with respect to areas of local government reform preferences, satisfaction with services, equity of services, financial connections, community wellbeing, and community characters. The research was conducted prior to the decision to amalgamate the Fitzroy, Mount Morgan, Livingstone and Rockhampton local governments into the Rockhampton Regional Council (subsequently ratified by the Queensland State Government and operationalised in March 2008).

The lessons learned from this work can be applied to local governments elsewhere in Australia, since the work serves to highlight the importance of identifying and considering communities of interest when considering municipal boundary changes. In fact, this work demonstrates that communities of interest are equally as important as issues regarding (for example) economies of scale. The paper concludes by providing suggestions on actions that could be undertaken at both the regional and local level in order to encourage and strengthen existing communities of interest to the benefit of community wellbeing.

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Australian Local Government Reform

Local government reform has been an important governance issue across Australia for many years, with most states embarking on large-scale reform processes in recent decades. In Queensland, a review of the long-term future of the 118 local councils was initiated in 2005, through the Queensland Government's Size, Shape and Sustainability (SSS) program. Later, the Local Government Reform Commission (LGRC) was established, following financial sustainability reviews undertaken the Queensland Treasury Corporation in 2007. The LGRC was charged with making recommendations on the most appropriate structure and boundaries for local government in Queensland. All local governments in Queensland were reviewed by the Reform Commission, except Brisbane City Council.

This paper reflects on the Queensland Government's SSS initiative whilst arguing for a more sustainable and holistic approach to evaluating 'best-fit' governance. The notion of sustainability is an important concept within local government reform; however the concept of 'sustainability' can easily be subjugated by an unnecessary form of reductionism if based solely upon basic economic indices. Local government has traditionally been the level of government that most closely interacts with the general electorate. It provides local planning administration, as well as the provision of a wide range of municipal and community services: these are not only economic factors of government, but are also social in nature, since many local government activities are involved in building communities. It is this vital, community-building role of local Government that may be lost in the rush to greater economic rationalisation. Local governments are also able to be responsive to local needs, provide local leadership and advocacy, foster civic pride and reflect local priorities in a manner quite removed from that of State and Federal government. There is, therefore, increasing evidence of an emerging need to appreciate, develop and enhance the social, ecological and governance aspects of sustainability (i.e., the triple or quadruple bottom line) within local governments. This is particularly so given the intrinsically important role of local Government in facilitating the growth of healthy, functioning communities, despite this function not being explicitly prescribed by legislation (Rogers and Ryan, 2001).

1.2 Alternative models for local representation

The Local Government Association of Queensland (LGAQ) (2005:15) distinguishes between four generic models of local governance arrangements. The first is resources sharing through service agreements, where one council will undertake specific functions for other councils, like strategic planning, waste management and works maintenance. The second model is resource sharing through joint enterprise, where councils combine a given function in order to garner scale economies, such as information technology system and management. The third model is that of merger/amalgamation, whilst the last model is that of significant boundary change.

Dollery and Johnson (2005:7) identify seven discrete alternative organisational models, which are arranged along a bipolar continuum bounded by the degrees to which political and operational control can be centralised or decentralised between local councils and the new organisational entity they could become. For example, the degree of centralisation would indicate the how much control was vested in the new (combined-Councils) governance structure, as opposed to the original smaller councils operating singularly (Dollery and Byrnes 2005:7). Malcolm (2005) narrows these into two alternative models: merger or formal cooperative arrangements. Dollery and Byrnes (2005) contend that most councils are unsure whether to merge or not, as there is scant documentation of merger success. Councils are therefore left to consider some form of cooperative model to deliver

outcomes. Cooperation could work well when the Shires are close geographically, and have shared community interest, since cooperation could create certain economies of scale and increase the range and quality of services to residents in the area, whilst simultaneously maintaining autonomy and local decision-making capacity.

1.3   Rationales for reform

In considering Queensland Treasury reports, local government reform in Queensland under the SSS initiative appeared largely economically driven. Certainly, past amalgamations (in Queensland and elsewhere) have offered the promise of economic efficiencies due to economies of scale. Basing local government reform on economic grounds which may be appropriate in some cases, for example, where councils are struggling to survive financially. However, in these cases it may also be useful to explore novel options for local governance, such as the development of partnerships between regional shires. Importantly, though, economic reasons are not (and should not) be the sole drivers and rationale for local amalgamations: local government expenditures represent only 2.3% of gross domestic product, and approximately 85% of that expenditure is self-funded. Furthermore, it has been posited by researchers that whilst Australian local government reform has resulted in few accountable economic benefits, it can generate fractious division within communities and come at a great social cost.

There has also been much discussion about the formation of local government boundaries and their alignment with 'communities of interest'. The concept of 'communities of interest' has important implications for local government reform, particularly where this involves combining (amalgamating) existing shire areas and their communities. Although it was not directly expressed, the initial philosophy of the LGAQ Size Shape and Sustainability initiative was to overtly embrace the need for a triple bottom line approach (LGAQ 2006).

1.4   Communities of Interest

A community of interest is a group of individuals united by shared interests or values. The working definition of communities of interest may also be broadened to include the commonalities shared by locals in terms of their perceptions of each other, and of other communities. Communities of interest are dynamic; they shift and change over time. It would seem logical, where practicable, to combine a consideration of both the economic and social (community of interest) aspects of communities when determining suitable boundary shifts to create new shire and city councils. However, the Australian experience of amalgamations and boundary shifts is typically one of discontent, because of resident's strong resistance to change, particularly in the case of forced boundary changes (Dollery and Byrens 2005)). Unfortunately, it seems often the case that communities of interest do not coincide with municipal or other administrative boundaries. Hence, the new arrangements for local government areas within Queensland offered an excellent opportunity to address these disparities.

2.0 METHODS

This paper is based on research undertaken in central Queensland and initially designed to ascertain not only where communities of interest exist within the Fitzroy-Mount Morgan region, but also to gauge the likely public support for new local government arrangements if they were pursued. The research was conducted prior to the decision to amalgamate the Fitzroy, Mount Morgan, Livingstone and Rockhampton local governments into the Rockhampton Regional Council (since ratified by the Queensland State Government and operationalised in March 2008).

2.1   Community consultation – stakeholder interviews

This first research phase involved meetings with Mount Morgan Shire Council (MMSC) representatives, followed by a series of interviews undertaken with individuals who were considered to be representative of key sections within the community (see Table 1). The majority of participants had lived in their respective areas for most of or all of their lives (some for generations). On a number of occasions, participants were community volunteers and/or members of more than one interest group. In each area, recruitment was undertaken through a combination of existing networks and snowball sampling (a method of non-probability sampling, De Vaus, 1991).

Stakeholder interviews consisted of a series of open-ended questions that focused around the SSS initiative, identification with the local community, key issues impacting the communities, strategies for change and recommendations to local, state and federal governments. The participants were interviewed in a location of their choice, with interviews were manually recorded and conducted by the same research team member on each occasion. These interviews were a crucial element of the mapping of the communities of interest in the study region. The results also allowed the characteristics needed to obtain representative sample target groups to be clarified prior to the conduct of computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) of residents (research phase 2).

Table 1   Community stakeholders and community groups represented

Community Groups Represented	*No. of participants*
Rangelands Society	1
Agforce	3
Landcare	6
Rural Fire Brigade	9
50+ group	1
Youth Network Group	1
Rotary	2
QCWA	2
Lions	3
Neighbourhood Watch	1
Promotions and Development Group	1
Gracemere Saleyards Board	1
Ratepayers Association	4
Progress Association	2
Property Board Committee	1
Ex-councillors	2
(1 Mount Morgan shire, 1 Fitzroy shire)	
TOTAL	**40**

2.2   Community consultation – resident survey

A statistically robust and ethically approved CATI survey was conducted using randomly selected households within Fitzroy and Mount Morgan Shires. Participants were drawn from a diversity of regions (see Table 2), which were stratified to represent the population concentrations within the two Shires. Three distinct sub-regions were sampled: Mount Morgan Shire, Gracemere ("Fitzroy Gracemere") and the remainder of Fitzroy Shire ("Fitzroy Other"). A survey instrument was

generated to measure (amongst other things) community interdependence and affiliations. In addition, preferences of future governance options and the degree of support for a 'common vision' for the target area were explored.

Table 2   Community stakeholders – locations represented

Morinish	Bouldercombe	Walmul	Ridgelands
Bajool	Struck Oil	Wycarbah	Dalma
Mount Morgan	Gogango	Stanwell	South Yaamba
Walter Hall	Alton Downs	Gracemere	

2.3   Other research

Supplementary research included statistical analyses of the baseline and projected demographic characteristics for the region. This data was sourced from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), the Office of Statistical and Economic Research (OESR), the Population Information Forecasting Unit (PIFU) Centre for Social Science Research (CSSR), and Central Queensland A New Millennium Database (CQANM). Morrison and Low (2007a, 2007b) were also engaged to provide qualified economic estimates of the proposed local government options.

The approach used to analyse the research material was multi-criteria analysis (MCA), which allows decision makers to include a full range of social, environmental, technical, economic and financial criteria (Hamalainen and Karjalainen, 1992; Jones *et al.*, 1990; Pearman *et al.*, 1989).   This tool is particularly applicable to cases where a single-criterion approach (such as cost-benefit analysis) falls short, especially where significant environmental and social impacts cannot be assigned specific values.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1   Identified 'communities of interest'

A core objective of the research was to identify and map the possible 'communities of interest' that exist within the Fitzroy and Mount Morgan Shires prior to possible amalgamation. Based on the existing knowledge and the interview data, three main areas were defined as broad communities of interest (Table 3). These locations were characterised by specific distinguishing features.

Fitzroy Shire communities identified mostly with their nearest neighbours (with whom they have communal social events with) and/or communities with similar lifestyles, for example, farmers who make their living off the land (as opposed to hobby farmers or urban residents).   Only one participant identified with the regional hub of Rockhampton. This participant resided in Gracemere a short distance from Rockhampton and owned a number of small businesses, some of which were in Rockhampton. Clearly, business interests will influence the types of communities of interests that participants identified with. Only one participant (residing in Gracemere) identified with Mount Morgan, seeing it as 'another small town'. No other Fitzroy participants identified with Mount Morgan, even those residing on the boundary between the two shires.

The participants who resided in Mount Morgan Shire associated with a different set of signifiers in their construction of the 'personality' of the Shire. The key collection of signifiers was those visual and cultural attributes that could be readily defined as heritage. Mount Morgan residents see the township as the central part of a heritage shire that does not have much in common with

neighbouring communities. Their identity is important to them, and they fear losing this in an amalgamation. As such, they identified with other historical towns in Queensland, not necessarily their neighbours.

Table 3 Communities of Interest – Fitzroy and Mount Morgan

Defined communities of interest	Locations	Distinguishing features
Fitzroy (Gracemere)	Gracemere Gracemere surrounds	Urban residential lifestyle, tree change Close proximity to Rockhampton High number of commuters to Rockhampton/Stanwell Rapid development Housing estates Some housing on acreage Some shopping facilities
Fitzroy (Other)	Alton Downs Ridgelands Kabra Bouldercombe Stanwell Wycarbah Kalapa Gogango Westwood Garnant South Yaamba Bajool Archer Morinish	Proud, rural historical culture Some tourism Active community groups and volunteering Rural / residential lifestyle Some medium to large sized properties Local store and / or pub Local sports grounds / halls Primary production and cattle grazing Many hobby farms Camping and picnicking areas Few primarily residential areas
Mount Morgan	Mount Morgan Struck Oil Horse Creek Walter Hall Walmul	Small country town lifestyle Rural / residential lifestyle High number of commuters to Rockhampton Some shopping facilities Proud, historical culture Tourism (Historic gold mine) Affordable housing Tree change Independence Resilience Some medium sized properties Some hobby farms Primary production and cattle grazing

A proposed reason as to why Fitzroy Shire communities do not identify positively with Mount Morgan communities was the reported perception of a negative social stigma associated with the shire, a social stigma which is common to other mining towns around Australia. This stigma was,

and in some areas still is, mostly perpetuated by the residents of neighbouring towns and shires, though it seems to be mostly unknown to tourists from further afield. While the stigma has decreased significantly over the years (especially in the immediate surrounds of Mount Morgan Shire), it still persists somewhat in the outlying districts, where being associated with Mount Morgan is regarded negatively.

Another possible reason as to why Fitzroy Shire communities do not identify with Mount Morgan may be its geographical isolation. Mount Morgan township is located atop a mountain range, with the main access roads being steep, winding mountain roads. There is currently very little incentive for neighbouring residents to travel to Mount Morgan and familiarise themselves with the community.

Considering the two abovementioned reasons, together with the fact that Mount Morgan is a unique historical shire (and its residents see it as that), it is not surprising that the residents of the two shires find that they have little in common, and therefore do not necessarily identify with each other. This is compounded to some degree by the independent nature of the shire inhabitants. However, participants in both shires agreed that they had more in common with each other than either of them had in common with Rockhampton.

Finding out where people shop or access other services is often an integral part of drawing new shire boundaries. Regarding shopping and other services, most participants utilised facilities in Rockhampton for the majority of their services, with many saying that if Gracemere expands to include better shopping facilities, they would go there instead. Mount Morgan Shire people tended to do more shopping locally than Fitzroy Shire people. This may be due to the arduous road to Rockhampton, or simply that Mount Morgan has more of the basic shopping and service providers in place. However, many participants in both shires clearly stated that where they do their shopping should not reflect a preferred amalgamation position. Rural people have to shop in urban centres; rural areas simply do not have the facilities. This does not mean that rural communities want to or should join urban communities, in this case Rockhampton.

3.2   Community survey of residents

The key findings from the community survey of residents are summarised below, under the key headings in which they are presented in the report.

3.2.1   Future directions/options: resident's support for local government boundary options

This section examined the preference of the residents of the Fitzroy and Mount Morgan shires with regards to the future local governance options proposed by the central Queensland Regional Organisation of Council's Review Group under the Queensland local government reform process. The options were:

- o   Option 1: Four shires into one shire (Amalgamating Fitzroy, Mount Morgan, Livingstone and Rockhampton councils into a single regional entity);
- o   Option 2: Four shires into two shires;
- o   Option 3: Four shires into three shires; and
- o   Option 4: Maintaining the four local government areas with some boundary changes.

The community survey results were quite conclusive. In total, 53.5% of respondents supported the amalgamation of Fitzroy and Mount Morgan Shires (option 2 & 3), with 44% of respondents

supporting the fourth option, which involved minor boundary changes to the existing shire lands. The first option of creating a 'supershire' by amalgamating Mount Morgan, Fitzroy, Rockhampton and Livingstone shires was exceedingly unpopular: 70% of people opposed this motion (of which 56% were strongly opposed). When prompted to supply possible alternative scenarios, the most commonly offered option was for all councils to remain the same. Of clear relevance to this paper is that although support for the amalgamation of the four local governments was not evident in three of the four areas (there was evidence of some support within Rockhampton) the LGRC recommended the amalgamation which was latter ratified.

3.2.2   Strength of response to amalgamation

Residents displayed an increase in support for the amalgamation of shires following suggestions of economic efficiency; however, the level of support reverted back to its original percentage once residents were asked to relate possible amalgamation with a potential for decreased representation.

3.2.3   Access and location of councillors

Local representation was clearly supported by residents within the study region. Survey respondents indicated a preference for easy access to local councillors that resided within the areas that they represented.

3.2.4   Alternative service delivery mechanisms

There was strong support for service agreements between local governments (e.g., amongst neighbouring shires and cities), particularly if these involved increased economic efficiencies and the sharing of major works. Residents also favoured various joint-venture and other partnership business approaches. However, there was some indication that the community should be engaged more on this issue, and particularly to be given the opportunity to be better informed of the differing options available for local government service delivery.

3.2.5   Shire name and structure

There was little interest from residents in offering alternative names for a newly created shire; 'colourful' suggestions were received from approximately 10% of surveyed participants. Once again, the communities wanted greater community engagement on these issues.

3.2.6   Representation

Nearly half of residents supported the introduction of a ward structure within the Fitzroy-Mount Morgan amalgamated shire, although a further one-quarter remained unsure about this option. There was no clear trend amongst residents regarding the number of division required in the new shire; similarly, residents were uncertain of the number of councillors required.

3.2.7   Knowledge of local council services and functions

Five services were easily identified by residents as being the responsibility of local councils (roads, parks & gardens, rubbish collection, sports facilities and sewage). However, further responses indicated that the residents of the study area had a poor understanding of local council services and functions (including when compared with elsewhere in central Queensland).

3.2.8   Satisfaction with shire services and staff

There was generally good feedback from the surveyed residents regarding their dealings with local shire staff and services. The exception to this was resident's perceptions on the quality of roads provided by council. Most participants were also happy with existing rates, with many favouring the status quo or seeking lower rates for the same level of service provision. Residents also indicated that they would generally prefer for council facilities and services to improve 'across the board'; or else they were happy and sought no change. Here, however, there was a noticeable difference in the responses obtained from Fitzroy (Gracemere) residents compared with the Mount Morgan and Fitzroy (other). A general trend emerged regarding council services, whereby the further people lived from the main urban centres the more dissatisfied they were with council services. This trend was also echoed in relation to value for money for rates: the further away people lived from the urban centres, the more they believed that they were not getting adequate services for the rates they pay. These responses could be interpreted as Fitzroy (Gracemere) residents identifying with more of an 'urban' association than those residents of Fitzroy (Other) and Mount Morgan Shires.

3.2.9   Equity of Services

The general feeling amongst residents was that current services and facilities provided by the respective Shire councils did not result in disadvantage to any particular grouping of age or activity. However, a significant number of respondents thought that urban groups were favoured over rural groups as far as council services are concerned.

3.2.10   Work, Travel and Expenditure

A dependency of residents on the regional capital (Rockhampton) was clearly evident. Generally, respondents indicated that a large proportion of their money was spent in Rockhampton, although there are significant differences in expenditure and travel patterns between the three sub-regions, with Mount Morgan illustrating a greater self reliance primarily due to the availability of appropriate goods and services. However, all residents displayed ongoing support for local businesses, citing the unavailability of goods and products as the principal reason why purchases were not made locally. Conditions such as a preferred life style and liveability based on a rural sentiment and quality of life were considered more significant to the respondent's identity than a weekly shopping trip into Rockhampton.

3.2.11   Community Wellbeing

The notion of community wellbeing was recognised as a subjective issue and one that is particularly difficult to measure. Fitzroy (other) recorded the best perception of community living, although a key finding was that Gracemere residents were much happier with their sporting facilities than were the Fitzroy Shire and Mount Morgan populations. Most residents stated that they felt safe in their neighbourhood, enjoyed living there, and generally felt that they could trust both the community in general and the local government. There was also strong evidence for informal social networks within each of the three communities, though there was typically little or no involvement in more formal groups, regardless of whether the latter were in the local area.

3.2.12   Community character

Two-thirds of the survey participants agreed that their community was a 'special place to live'. Results from the remaining questions relating to community character strongly reinforced the spatial difference that exists between urbanised centres and rural sectors of the population. Respondents clearly defined their local areas as rural, non urban, generally quiet and peaceful, and – most

importantly – different from the regional centre (of Rockhampton). Rural aspect, peace and quiet, country lifestyle and friendliness were consistently offered as the most positive aspects about living in Fitzroy and Mount Morgan Shires; lack of facilities and services were often the most disliked features.

3.3   Indicators of social cohesion and interdependence

The community consultation exercise indicated that there is a general level of social cohesion evident between Fitzroy and Mount Morgan shires, particularly in relation to a common rural identification. However, social cohesion in this case would appear to reside in communities that are populated by strongly independent and resilient individuals. There were strong feelings against interdependence which were noted during the community consultation; Mount Morgan locals in particular are keen to retain their independence (both from Fitzroy and from other centres such as Rockhampton).

Even though this research was exploratory in nature, there was some indication that there were strong local networks throughout the region. Conversely, bridging networks (i.e., those that bind communities of interest (Narayan, (1999)) were less evident. Importantly for this research however, both communities appeared to be bonded even less strongly with the urban centre of Rockhampton. Moreover, the like-mindedness of many residents, particularly the fact that most survey participants appear to identify with the 'rural' lifestyle and/or have similar business interests, suggests that the fledgling social cohesion between the communities of interest may be built upon in the future, using these areas of common ground.

3.4   Barriers to social cohesion

One of the main barriers to social cohesion of the study area would appear to be the socio-economic stigma that is (somewhat unfairly) associated with the township of Mount Morgan as a location which houses a higher proportion of poorly educated, poorly paid and/or unemployed people. This can be seized as an opportunity for community building as there is an excellent opportunity for local governments to focus on the negative perceptions associated with the different communities of interest. This could, for example, involve strategically building an engagement strategy that addresses these issues head on, thereby seeking change for the better from within each community of interest.

Another important divide identified in the communities was the apparent resentment that some 'rural people' bore towards 'townies wanting a tree-change'. There was a perception expressed by some rural people that they are not understood by 'urban people', largely because of a perceived different way of life, different attitudes and values. This was expressed as rural people wanting to keep their rural way of life; they did not want 'growth' or at least growth as it was defined by 'urban people' such as greater urbanisation. Once these sentiments have been identified and understood, strategies can be adopted to mitigate conflicting sentiments and help build stronger, more robust communities that gain strength from a commonality of goals.

3.5   Vulnerabilities of existing communities of interest

An important part of the research process has been to identify the vulnerabilities of the existing communities of interest. In the case of Mount Morgan, for example, the rural township is reasonably

self-sufficient, but has a number of compounding problems that centre on the availability and opportunity for economic development. Subsequently, one of the main problems is unemployment causing negative growth (people moving away). The level of influence that local governments exert over major investment should not be overestimated: local councils can clearly play a role in helping to attract further business investment and therefore assist with raising employment rates and economic growth.

It is evident that Fitzroy residents would like a higher lever of independence from the urban centre of Rockhampton. Fitzroy residents, including those of Gracemere, have indicated that they want better shopping facilities and services, and especially better council services (in areas outside Gracemere). Furthermore, they would certainly support the provision of local goods and services if they were given the opportunity to do so. Economic linkages with Rockhampton are a reality, however, thought should be given to strategies that can ensure that the relationship remains beneficial (rather than detrimental) to the peri-urban and rural locations of Fitzroy and Mount Morgan Shires.

3.6   Strategies for the strengthening of communities of interest

Appropriate strategies for the strengthening of communities of interest tend to have the most traction when they are developed for, and agreed to by, their communities. In part, this is a result of the process of engaging community debate, since any consensuses and outcomes will have greater community ownership.

Understanding and characterising 'communities of interest' such as illustrated with this research are of global concern. Communities of interest are a way of making sense of regionalism for effective governance at the local government level. Regionalism embodies a way of life, where people living in regional and remote areas choose to form communities that have a voice in the face of what they consider great encroachment from federal and state level governments. Proponents of regionalism (e.g., Bell, 2006) argue for the empowerment of councils to work together more effectively at the regional level. The argument is that local government should be empowered to play a larger and fuller role in 'governance arrangements through embracing the principle of subsidiarity, eliminating cost shifting, fully addressing the problem of vertical fiscal imbalance, and providing local government with greater autonomy through full constitutional recognition' (Bell, 2006).

Local government embodies the spirit of subsidiarity, a devolutionist principle which holds that the functions of government should be exercised as closely as practicable to the affected citizens (Bell, 2006). Furthermore, local government delivers services and facilities on a human scale. It is responsive to local need, provides local leadership and advocacy, fosters civic pride and reflects local priorities in a way state and federal governments never can.

Illustrative of the dualistic trend identified by Maguire (1999) is the process of 'diminishing contrasts' as regional Shire councils voluntarily joining to form Regional Organisation of Councils (ROCs) (Malcolm, 2005). Increasingly, regionalism following the ROCs model is becoming prevalent as regional shire councils are forming regional blocks that would suit their set-up, and to cooperatively tackle the many challenges facing regional councils. However, just as regional Shire Councils look voluntarily or otherwise towards new regional arrangements there is strong evidence to suggest communities of interest as forming part of the key indicators of sustainability (Morton 2005). The 'increasing variety' that Maguire (1999) alludes to in this case is the uniqueness of each regional area as characterised by the specific communities of interest that manifest as a region.

4.0 Conclusion

This research has been vital in enabling a characterisation of the important and complex communities of interest in Central Queensland. Unfortunately, such communities of interest have not been suitably acknowledged in the Queensland Government's SSS program, as this is largely based on economic rationalisation. The resulting danger is that by ignoring or simply choosing to overlook the nature of communities, broad regional councils will fail to adequately govern in the best interest of those communities for which they have jurisdiction.

Political expediency coupled with an economic mindset is a recipe for top down governance that can fail to engage and empower communities thus increasing the likelihood of propagating disenfranchisement through disassociation. We would argue that it is fundamental for democratic governance to not only engage with citizens but to also equate the sentiments of communities of interest with the aims, objectives and actions of regional leadership to ensure a true form of collaborative partnership is created. This requires a more sustainable and holistic approach to evaluating 'best-fit' governance.

5.0 Acknowledgements

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