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# Policy Debates

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## Beyond the State: Shaping Governance and Development Policy in an Australian Region

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PAPE M., FAIRBROTHER P. and SNELL D. Beyond the state: shaping governance and development policy in an Australian region, *Regional Studies*. The role of the state in regional development is often unclear and contested. In Australia's Gippsland region, in the east of the state of Victoria, state actors shape trajectories of development while limiting local input to consultative forums. However, this account of regional governance obscures the role of marginalized actors. Despite limited opportunities for meaningful involvement, less powerful social groups can be influential by strategically engaging with state structures and local communities. Drawing upon a strategic-relational approach, with specific reference to the regional politics of scale, territory and relationality, this empirical study considers the role of the state and marginalized actors in shaping regional development policy.

Regional governance    Regional development    Policy    Strategic-relational approach    Scalar politics    Civil society

PAPE M., FAIRBROTHER P. and SNELL D. 州层级之上：形塑澳大利亚区域的治理与发展政策，*区域研究*。州政府在区域发展中的角色经常是不明确且受到争议的。在澳大利亚的吉普斯兰区域中，维多利亚州东部的州行动者，形塑了发展的轨迹，同时将在地投入限制于协商论坛。但此般对区域治理的解释，蒙蔽了被边缘化的行动者之角色。儘管权力较小的社会团体，能够进行有意义的参与的机会有限，但他们仍可透过策略性地涉入州的结构及在地社区而具有影响力。本经验研究透过运用策略—关系取径，并特别指涉尺度、领域及关系性的区域政治，考量州和边缘化的行动者在形塑区域发展政策中的角色。

区域治理    区域发展    政策    策略—关系方法    尺度政治    公民社会

PAPE M., FAIRBROTHER P. et SNELL D. Au-delà de l'État: l'élaboration de la gouvernance et de la politique de développement dans une région australienne, *Regional Studies*. Le rôle de l'État dans l'aménagement du territoire est souvent loin d'être évident et est contesté. Dans la Gippsland en Australie, dans l'est de l'état de Victoria, les acteurs étatiques élaborent des trajectoires de développement, tout en limitant ainsi la participation locale à des forums consultatifs. Cependant, ce compte-rendu de la gouvernance régionale dissimule le rôle des acteurs marginalisés. Malgré des possibilités de participation utiles limitées, des groupes sociaux moins puissants peuvent s'avérer influents en s'engageant de manière stratégique avec les structures de l'État et les communautés locales. Puisant dans une approche stratégique-relacionnelle, abordant en particulier la politique régionale d'échelle, de territoire et de relationalité, cette étude empirique considère le rôle de l'État et des acteurs marginalisés dans l'élaboration de la politique d'aménagement du territoire.

Gouvernance régionale    Aménagement du territoire    Politique    Approche stratégique-relacionnelle    Politique scalaire  
Société civile

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PAPE M., FAIRBROTHER P. und SNELL D. Jenseits des Staats: Gestaltung der Regierungsführung und Entwicklungspolitik in einer australischen Region, *Regional Studies*. Die Rolle des Staats in der Regionalentwicklung ist oftmals unklar und umstritten. In der australischen Region Gippsland im Osten des Bundesstaats Victoria prägen staatliche Akteure den Verlauf der Entwicklung und begrenzen zugleich die Mitwirkung auf lokale Beratungsforen. Bei dieser Darstellung der regionalen Regierungsführung wird jedoch die Rolle von marginalisierten Akteuren verschleiert. Trotz begrenzter Chancen für eine bedeutsame Beteiligung können auch weniger mächtige Gesellschaftsgruppen Einfluss ausüben, indem sie strategisch an staatlichen Strukturen und lokalen Gemeinschaften ansetzen. In dieser empirischen Studie wird auf der Grundlage eines strategisch-relationalen Ansatzes unter besonderer Berücksichtigung der regionalen Politik des Maßstabs, des Gebiets und der Relationalität die Rolle des Staats und der marginalisierten Akteure bei der Gestaltung regionaler Entwicklungspolitik untersucht.

Regionale Regierungsführung    Regionalentwicklung    Politik    Strategisch-relationaler Ansatz    Skalare Politik  
Zivilgesellschaft

PAPE M., FAIRBROTHER P. y SNELL D. Más allá del Estado: definición de la política gubernamental y de desarrollo en una región australiana, *Regional Studies*. Con frecuencia el papel del Estado en el desarrollo regional es cuestionado y confuso. En la región australiana de Gippsland, al este del Estado de Victoria, los actores estatales definen las trayectorias del desarrollo limitando a la vez la aportación local a los foros consultivos. Sin embargo, mediante esta representación de la gobernanza regional se eclipsa el papel de los actores marginados. Pese a las oportunidades limitadas para una participación significativa, los grupos sociales con menos poder pueden ejercer una influencia al participar estratégicamente con las estructuras estatales y las comunidades locales. A partir de un planteamiento estratégico y relacional, con referencia específica a las políticas regionales de escala, territorio y relacionalidad, en este estudio empírico analizamos qué papel desempeñan el Estado y los actores marginados a la hora de definir la política de desarrollo regional.

Gobierno regional    Desarrollo regional    Política    Planteamiento estratégico y relacional    Política escalar    Sociedad civil

JEL classifications: D70, H70, R58

## INTRODUCTION

Regional governance comprises a range of actors, from governments to sectional interest groups. Often it is unclear how these actors and the diverse interests they represent are interacting within processes of regional decision-making and policy formation. Research has often highlighted the role of the state in combination with politically and economically dominant interest groups, generating an account of regional development that emphasizes the interaction between state and market forces. There has been far less consideration of the ways in which local interest groups, particularly those that are considered to be less economically or politically central, can contest and shape processes of regional development. Drawing upon a strategic relational approach (JESSOP, 2008), and informed by debates about the political economy of regions (LAGENDIJK, 2007; JESSOP, 2008; GOODWIN, 2012), this paper explores policy development in the context of a coal-rich region in south-eastern Australia. The analysis begins with the claim that regional development projects can address a more diverse and holistic range of local interests and priorities when policy is formulated in inclusive ways (CHRISTOPHERSON *et al.*, 2010). The extent to which this occurs, however, depends not only on the actions of empowered state and economic actors, but also on the ways in which more marginalized groups engage with and reconfigure existing institutional structures.

The argument is threefold. First, and frequently noted, power relations are at the forefront of regional governance, particularly with respect to questions of transparency and democratic empowerment (HERBERT-CHESHIRE, 2000; WELCH, 2002). Of note, there is a scalar dimension to these relations (HUBER and EMEL, 2009; MORGAN, 2007; MACKINNON, 2011). Second, the state acts to shape the uneven involvement of regional actors in decision-making processes (CHRISTOPHERSON *et al.*, 2010). Third, while dominant political and economic interests appear to determine regional development policies and outcomes, there exist opportunities for other regional actors to advance their own agenda strategically. The form and emphasis of regional development policy reflects the ways in which the state, market, citizens and civil society interact in a particular locality and exert their relative power and values (PIKE *et al.*, 2007). This analysis draws attention to the ways in which marginalized regional actors, particularly from within civil society, can counter and influence dominant approaches to regional governance (PIVEN and CLOWARD, 2000; see also GARUD *et al.*, 2007).

The investigation is developed via a targeted case study of Australia's Gippsland region, in the east of the state of Victoria, and particularly the Latrobe Valley area, where successive federal and state governments have engaged in regional development efforts. Nonetheless, development strategies in the region remain

largely unrealized, and the institutional structures of regional governance are underdeveloped. Uncertainty has surrounded the capacity of state and federal governments to shape the region's development and their commitment to doing so. The case of the Gippsland region, and particularly the Latrobe Valley development campaign led by the federal Labor government in 2011–12, reveals the complex relations that underpin regional governance. In particular, actors that are less politically and economically central have been influential via means that are important though often absent from mainstream accounts of regional development.

The paper is structured as follows. The analysis begins with a theoretical outline of the conditions for regional governance. This is followed by a description of the case study and an account of the Australian regional development context, with particular attention to relevant policies and approaches of both state and federal governments. Findings from the case study are presented, followed by an assessment that draws out the implications for analysis of regional governance.

#### *Dimensions of regional governance*

It is not always clear what is meant by 'region'; hence, definition is critical for analysis (ALLEN and COCHRANE, 2007; AMIN, 2004). There are three considerations here. First, institutional arrangements and the policy discourse in relation to 'region' are important. In the Australian context, there are definitional matters with regard to the place of regions relative to national, state and local government arrangements. While all three levels of government in Australia participate in regional governance, with regions typically identified at the sub-state level and often involving multiple local governments, regional institutions stand ambiguously separate from the official three-tiered structure of the Australian state. There is thus considerable instability in the construction and deployment of 'region' as a concept in Australian political discourse and policy.

Second, 'regions' figure in the scalar dimensions of political processes. The concept of scalar politics considers both the material and the discursive elements of political struggle (HUBER and EMEL, 2009; MACKINNON, 2010). Scalar identities, such as the 'region', can be constructed or deployed strategically by actors, organizations and movements in their efforts to advance particular material relations (MACKINNON, 2010). However, the capacity of agents to advance social and political projects that alter or transform an inherited scalar structure, such as the 'region', is influenced by the prevailing power relations within institutional and structural arrangements (JESSOP, 2008).

Third, there are territorial and relational dimensions to the political struggle over regional institutional

structures (GOODWIN, 2012). Territory refers to spatiality, while the relational dimension addresses their connectivity (GOODWIN, 2012, p. 1182). Interaction between the territorial and relational dimensions produces regions whose spatial boundaries may be unclear (MASSEY, 2004, p. 3). As a result, the scalar politics that surround the establishment of regional institutions and policies may involve social and material interests that are both wide-ranging and fluid. The task is to explain both 'the scalar and territorial dimensions of particular political practices' (GOODWIN, 2012, p. 1189).

These three considerations underpin this analysis of regional politics and policy-making. While regional governance often appears institutionally bounded in some respects, it is porous and impermanent in others (MORGAN, 2007, 2014). The instability of this arrangement is sufficient to allow diverse actors from both within and outside of the state to focus on the region in pursuit of strategic economic and social agendas (AMIN, 2004; MACKINNON, 2010). However, this also leads to questions about political power, inclusionary politics and the nature of changing relations both within and between regions. Institutions cannot be taken for granted, shaped as they are by diverse and competing actors with different vested interests (JESSOP, 2001). Thus the under-determined institutional location of regions and their politics in countries such as Australia can mask the precise nature of political relations (MORGAN, 2014).

JESSOP's (2001) 'strategic-relational approach', which draws upon a critical realist ontological position, emphasizes that institutional structures are never fully constituted and must instead be continually reproduced through specific actions. Given that the reproduction of structures is always tendential, it is possible that contestation among actors will generate alternative institutional forms (JESSOP, 2001). Within such a framing, social structures are irreducible to yet inseparable from the strategies of agents, and the actions of agents are understood to be simultaneously 'structured' and 'structuring' (JESSOP, 2001, p. 1223; see also ARCHER, 2000).

It is within and against these social conditions that agents seek to take strategic action, which can ultimately reproduce, alter or transform existing social and institutional structures. Yet this is never a straightforward process in either implementation or outcome:

because subjects are never unitary, never fully aware of the conditions of strategic action, never fully equipped to realize their preferred strategies, and always face possible opposition from actors pursuing other strategies or tactics, failure is an ever present possibility.

(JESSOP, 2008, p. 47)

Failure or success in realizing strategic initiatives is a prospect for both state and non-state actors. While these actors are not in similar positions of power and authority

to shape institutional, structural and development outcomes at the regional level, they both confront similar degrees of structural conditioning. For example, the form and emphasis of regional development is influenced by the ways in which the state acts to shape these processes, even while there are constraints on the extent to which the state can formally intervene in regional economies (BROWN, 2005; DERELI, 2011; PIKE *et al.*, 2007). The intervention of the state may take on the appearance of facilitation, particularly with respect to promoting the engagement of a range of actors who may not have previously been engaged in regional governance. In this respect, steps are taken to give 'compensatory' content to the market relations that also underpin regional economic development (JESSOP, 2002, p. 455; LARNER, 2005, p. 10). Under such circumstances, the actions of the state, while constrained, may nonetheless serve to maintain existing political-economic relations and marginalize non-state actors pursuing counter agendas.

On the other hand, a mobilized local leadership can also be central to the trajectory of regional development (BEER and CLOWER, 2014). This may involve a range of 'actors, politicians, professionals, and state and non-state actors in different settings' (AYRES, 2014, p. 2). Such actors frame opportunities and challenges for regional development in specific and often targeted ways (LÉVESQUE and MURRAY, 2013). This draws attention to the ways in which diverse actors navigate and strategically engage with the relationships, processes and definitions that comprise the development of regional policies (GARUD *et al.*, 2007; KLIJN and KOPPENJAN, 2012; MACKINNON, 2010).

Such dynamics also raise questions about democratic legitimacy. Regional policy development processes may appear to be participatory in nature, but in practice fall short, particularly in the absence of genuine debate, reflection and binding decision-making power (KLIJN and KOPPENJAN, 2012; MORGAN, 2014). Some actors may be able to promote and extend repertoires of action via their existing relationship to state institutional and economic structures, while others experience limits and restrictions because of their distance from nodes of political or economic power. The latter may also lead to significant marginalization or inability to build effective strategic relations.

One question, therefore, is under what conditions are regional development policies developed, and by whom? And, how might governments enable the appearance of diverse actor participation in policy formulation? To explore these questions, the focus is on the seldom-studied 'state-civil society' relation (HEINELT and KÜBLER, 2005). Such a focus can generate insights into how regional civil society actors, who may find themselves disempowered within existing institutional arrangements and thus outside of actual decision-making processes, can nonetheless come to influence the shape of policy debates and decisions. As

WELCH (2002) observes, regional governance comprises relationships that may include those who are in established and influential networks as well as those who are marginal to such networks. However, even marginalized civil society actors may develop strategies for effecting change within the institutional structures of regional governance, strategies that can in turn come to be reflected in ongoing reconstitution of institutional arrangements (JESSOP, 2008, pp. 45–46).

#### *Case study*

The Gippsland Region has long been the subject of public debate about government interventions in the region's economic development. The region comprises six local government areas: Baw Baw, Latrobe City, Wellington, East Gippsland, South Gippsland and Bass Coast (Fig. 1). Overlaying these local government areas are the State of Victoria and the Commonwealth of Australia, including their departments and related administrative and support services. The total population of the Gippsland region was 255 718 in 2011 (AUSTRALIAN BUREAU OF STATISTICS (ABS), 2011) and the economy is based on four major resources: coal, oil and gas, forestry, and agriculture (FAIRBROTHER *et al.*, 2012).

A core focus for economic development and restructuring within this region is the Latrobe Valley area. Because of its vast brown coal reserves, the Latrobe Valley has long been the focus of state policies (WELLER, 2011). Beginning in the 1920s with the establishment of the State Electricity Corporation, the Latrobe Valley area is Victoria's principal site of power generation. In the mid-1990s, this corporation and its assets were privatized, with major implications for employment in the local government areas of Latrobe City, Baw Baw and Wellington (Fig. 2). Together these local government areas account for a population of about 161 000 people (ABS, 2010; STATE GOVERNMENT OF VICTORIA, 2012a). While the population is increasing, this area ranks as one of the most disadvantaged in the state, dating from the privatization of coal and energy assets (DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION, EMPLOYMENT AND WORKPLACE RELATIONS (DEEWR), 2012).

This case study is based on extensive field research in the Latrobe Valley area and the wider Gippsland region. In 2011–12, interviews were conducted with 58 local actors from government, the private sector, education and civil society mainly but not exclusively based in the Latrobe Valley, as well as four workshops with a total of 36 participants. In addition, the researchers participated in three policy forums, involving state and federal officials. Between 2008 and 2011, an additional 15 interviews were conducted with leading union figures in the region. A further seven interviews were undertaken with members of the Gippsland Trades and Labour Council (GTLC) in 2013, focusing on the

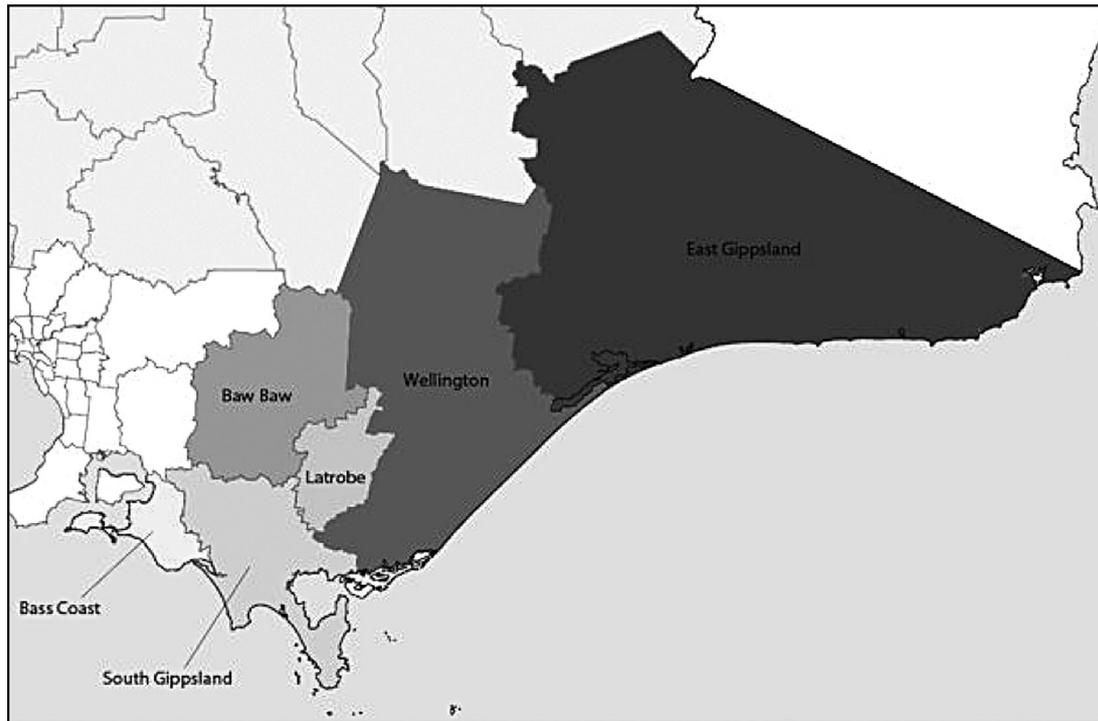


Fig. 1. Local government areas of Gippsland region in the state of Victoria, Australia

history of the confederation from the privatization period to 2013.

A second empirical aspect of the study describes the range of agencies that were established in the Gippsland region following the federal government's Clean Energy Legislation, including their composition and purpose. The aim is to analyse the key actors, relationships, structures and processes that underpin regional policy formation (MORGAN, 2014). This focus allows a consideration of the regional development agencies in Gippsland, the structure and actions of these agencies, and the nature of their contribution to economic diversification and development policy.

Importantly, however, the analysis is extended to include the intervention efforts of civil society actors who often fall outside of prevailing accounts of regional development. The purpose is to capture the dynamics of contestation, exclusion and subversion that also shape regional development policies and outcomes in important ways. In this way, the analysis extends debates about the politics of regional change and development.

#### *Institutional context*

The constitutional arrangements surrounding regional development in Australia have particular consequences for the governance in relation to regional development. On the one hand, successive governments at the federal level have shied away from committing significant resources to regional development. On the other hand, while state governments have constitutional

responsibility for regional areas, they have limited fiscal capacity to intervene in meaningful material ways (MAUDE, 2004). Local governments act under the direction of their overarching state government and also have highly limited capabilities (BROWN, 2005; DALY, 2000). The result is a complex and fragmented set of institutional arrangements for regional governance, intervention and decision-making processes.

State and federal governments have increasingly sought to establish 'external' or 'independent' regional development organizations and agencies (BEER *et al.*, 2005). Most recently these include 55 regional development bodies under the umbrella of the federal government-funded Regional Development Australia (RDA) partnership (RDA, 2012). Complementing these arrangements at the state level is Regional Development Victoria (RDV). In the Gippsland region, RDA's local committee 'aims to facilitate regional thought leadership to ensure sustainable economic and social growth for Gippsland' (RDA GIPPSLAND, 2014). Ten committee members are drawn from across Gippsland and appointed by the federal and state governments.

Such agencies are one step removed from the departments that make up the central organs of government, but they nonetheless remain answerable to government ministers and are dependent upon government funding. Such regional development agencies face the dual challenges of influence and legitimacy (BEER *et al.*, 2005; BROWN, 2005). These agencies have limited fiscal and

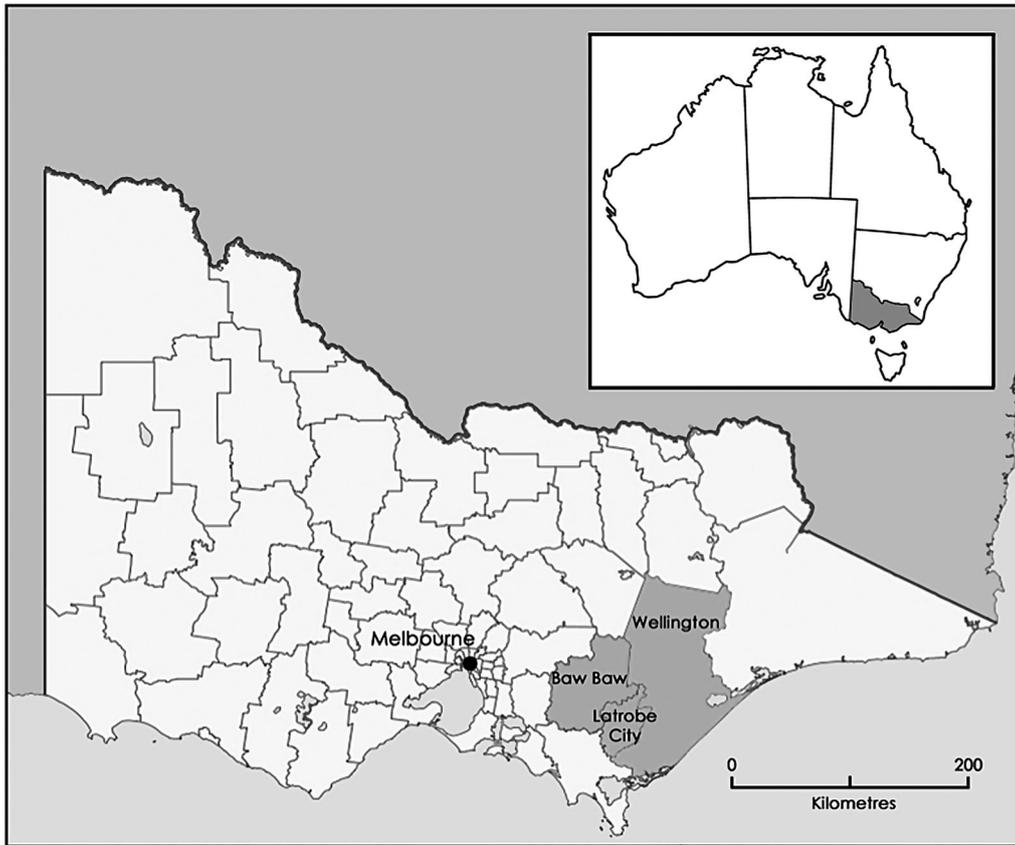


Fig. 2. Local government areas of the Latrobe valley area in the state of Victoria, Australia

decision-making capacities, thereby reducing their role principally to that of negotiation and strategy development. There is also typically an absence of local control over the constitution and remit of such agencies (BEER and MAUDE, 2005).

While regional development agencies are typically concerned with establishing partnerships with the private sector and attracting inward investment, they often aim to involve local residents in decision-making processes (COLLITTS, 2004). Consultative forums are presented as enabling the direct involvement of local residents in economic policy development and ensuring that such policies embody local deliberation, empowerment and ownership (REDDEL and WOOLCOCK, 2004). However, where governments resist building the institutional structures that would formalize the role and influence of public participation, such participation risks becoming merely a stamp of legitimacy for the decisions of policy-makers (BROWN, 2005; MUNRO-CLARK, 1992).

In 2010, government agencies in the Gippsland region were faced with the challenge of further diversifying the regional economy in the face of the federal Labour government's 'Clean Energy Future' legislation. At the core of the legislation was a carbon reduction scheme comprised of a transitional fixed price on carbon with plans to move to a full market-based

emissions trading scheme in three to five years. The legislation was the topic of intense political debate, and was also met with fierce resistance from companies within energy-intensive industries (SNELL and SCHMITT, 2012). Each level of government proposed policies and programmes to try to assist in the development of a sustainable regional economy, usually centred on the future of the coal-rich Latrobe Valley.

During the period of the legislation, the Latrobe Valley Transition Committee (LVTC) was established by the state and federal governments, via the RDA and RDV. This sponsored committee involved leading figures from education, health, employment and employee bodies. The purpose was to develop a 'community-informed plan' for economic diversification in the region (LVTC, 2012a; RDV, 2012a). It included the three chief executive officers of the three Latrobe Valley local governments, the Chair of RDA Gippsland, the Secretary of the GTLC, and senior staff from the RDV, Skills Victoria and the RDA. Others included senior staff from the major mining and energy union and the regional employers' association.

The aim of the committee was to examine impacts and opportunities of structural change in the Latrobe Valley economy. It commissioned independent research (FAIRBROTHER *et al.*, 2012), developed a

public discussion paper (LVTC, 2012a, 2012b), consulted with the region's businesses and communities, and released an economic development plan (LVTC, 2012c). Without the resources to implement the plan, the committee's role was advisory only. Furthermore, with its focus on the Latrobe Valley area as opposed to the Gippsland region, the relationship of the LVTC to the broader infrastructure of regional governance was unclear.

#### *Constructing regional leadership*

A consistent feature of representative politics in Gippsland is the absence of a unified and broadly representative voice for the region. One attempt to provide such a voice comes via the six local governments that constitute the region. They have attempted to increase their capabilities by working together under the umbrella of the Gippsland Local Government Network (GLGN). The network undertakes planning (economic growth, well-being and sustainable practices) and advocacy (GLGN, 2011). It also works to implement the Gippsland Regional Plan (GRP), addressing the plan's priority areas, including the Gippsland Low Carbon Economy Transition Plan (GIPPSLAND REGIONAL PLAN PROJECT CONTROL GROUP, 2010).

Another government-led effort to establish leadership and effective decision-making in the region is the Gippsland Regional Management Forum. Founded in 2005, the forum comprises chief executive officers from local government councils as well as senior representatives from state government departments. An initiative of the Victorian state government, regional management forums including that of Gippsland, aim to work with local stakeholders to identify key issues, particularly those in need of an integrated state and local government response (WEAR, 2012).

The federal and state government-supported regional development agencies, such as the Gippsland arm of the RDA, have also attempted to construct a voice for the Gippsland region (FAIRBROTHER *et al.*, 2012). The appointees to the various development agencies that have been active in the region have typically been selected because of their characterization as 'local leaders'. However, despite the efforts of governments at the local, state and federal levels, the prevailing sentiment at the local level is that the diverse interest groups within the Gippsland region lack unity and direction:

We need to pull together and make a very strong single voice, and at the moment [...] we're not quite at the point where we've all agreed on what the future should be and singing from the same hymn sheet.

(private sector representative, 26 April 2012)

Beyond the efforts of government in Gippsland, a range of disjointed and partisan regional organizations have emerged over the past decade. The principal employers and economic advocacy group is the Committee

for Gippsland, founded in 2011 and comprising over 75 private sector employers, education higher and vocational education providers, and around five business-type local associations. Similar to other government-led organizations in Gippsland, the committee aims to provide a voice for the interests of capital within the region. But as with the GLGN, the influence of the Committee for Gippsland over development policy formation is not clear.

A number of these regional bodies have secured a voice in relation to the GRP. This plan was developed by the GLGN, RDA Gippsland and the Regional Management Forum, and launched in 2010. The Committee for Gippsland also formally supports the plan. These four bodies make up the Gippsland Regional Plan Leadership Group, which supports an advocacy group titled 'One Gippsland'. In relation to a three-day visit to Canberra, the nation's capital, it was stated: 'It was One Gippsland's first foray into collaborative federal advocacy, and there is no doubt we achieved our objective of putting Gippsland fair and square on the Federal radar' (ONE GIPPSLAND, 2013). This advocacy body also claims to be a voice for the region, particularly with regard to federal government decision-making.

Among other groups in the Gippsland region that have become prominent in relation to visions of regional development is Agribusiness Gippsland Inc. (AGI). The agricultural sector contributes A\$6 billion per year of Gippsland's A\$13 billion gross regional production and is a significant employer in the region, with 52% of Gippsland's business involved in or supporting dairy, agriculture, forestry, fishing and upstream processing. The AGI is linked to formal structures of government as the regional component of the Department of Primary Industry (State) supported agribusiness networks.

Overall, these arrangements represent a structure of regional governance that must be reproduced at regular intervals, but without ever attaining the formality or permanence of local, state and federal government institutions. In their detail they reveal the ongoing challenge of establishing a legitimate representative body and decision-making forum for the Gippsland region. Nonetheless, these regional governance bodies have become a reference point for more marginalized organizations in Gippsland, including unions, climate change networks and related 'community' groups such as the Country Women's Association.

This is despite the fact that regional governance bodies lack the authority and the resources to take action in relation to key issues. Rather, such bodies can be understood as shaping the discourse of regional development, particularly as it concerns the regional economy. They claim to do so in a participatory way by engaging in cycles of consultation with the broader public. At the same time, however, these also represent the discourses and strategies of the state and federal

governments, who determine the scope and character of regional development bodies.

#### *'Participatory' regional development*

State and federal governments present their regional economic development policies as forged through inclusive and transparent decision-making processes (CHESHIRE and LAWRENCE, 2005; LATROBE VALLEY MINISTERIAL TASKFORCE, 2001). Public consultation was a feature of the LVTC remit, and took the form of a series of forums in which the committee's discussion paper was presented for comment. This invitation for local input via consultation has a long history in the Gippsland region (LATROBE VALLEY MINISTERIAL TASKFORCE, 2001) and is associated with scepticism from local participants. As stated:

Ten years ago, I believe we were in forums where we were saying exactly the same thing. We were saying these are the things that should happen. Well, have they? Are we any way further?

(local resident, 23 March 2012)

It seems like a circle going around and around, arguing all the same things, but I guess there's no strategic decision.

(private sector manager, 23 March 2012)

Furthermore, while the forums inviting public comment aspired to provide a vehicle through which the region's population can engage in the decision-making process and contribute to building a regional voice, in reality such forums have not attracted the interest of the wider public.

The Transition Committee presented itself as broadly representative of employer and organized labour interests whose role was: 'to develop a community-informed plan to guide cooperative effort, minimize economic disruption in the region and help grow its industry base and workforce' (LVTC, 2012b, 4). On the basis of commissioned research, targeted consultation and written submissions, the committee produced a discussion paper, issued in April 2012. Altogether, 27 written submissions were received, of which 23 were public: one from each of the three local councils involved with the committee; two from town associations; five from industry and business groups; two from companies; two from climate change and transition bodies; one from a government agency; one from a union; one from an education association; and six from individuals (LVTC, 2012b). The other submissions were confidential.

While opportunities were available via this procedure to contribute to the development of the final report, the range of submissions was relatively narrow in interest representation with greatest input from economic interest bodies, labour and related organizations, and civic bodies. There was, for example, no submission from power generation companies or from resource-based industries such as forestry and paper, agriculture and

food, transport and logistics. Only one union made a submission.

In addition, the discussion paper was presented for comment at public forums that formed the basis of the 'consultation' process. These events were held in each of the three councils that make up the Latrobe Valley area, and were attended by a total of 55 residents (RDV, 2012a). These forums were commented on in the following way:

Certainly at most of the get-togethers in [the Latrobe Valley] it's the usual subjects who turn up.

(local government representative, 23 March 2012)

It's a known percentage [that participate. ...] We generally don't get the majority.

(local resident, 29 March 2012)

This limited and somewhat disconnected involvement characterizes the last three years of engagement and involvement in the area.

In relation to transition and regeneration in the Gippsland region, and particularly the Latrobe Valley area, government action has consisted of little more than 'generic statements' (industry representative, 29 March, 2012). Consultative forums over recent years have been characterized by repetition and a lack of coordination, with little evidence that successive governments or regional development agencies have attempted to build upon the contributions of local people. Instead local participation is reduced to the generation of 'random thoughts' (local government representative, 23 March, 2012) that are ultimately of little consequence to the outputs of regional development bodies.

Thus while the reality of 'public consultation' conjures images of engagement, the reality is that very few local interest groups or representatives participate. Fewer local actors again are given the opportunity to sit on the board of a development agency. Of the 14 individuals who served on the LVTC, seven were in paid positions for agencies or governments, such as chief executive officers of local government councils. Other local actors who have sought to become a part of this process have found themselves caught in a cycle of consultation that is external to the actual decision-making processes of the state and regional development agencies.

#### *Circumventing consultation*

Identifying opportunities has not been difficult for the Gippsland region. A number of reports and strategic plans have identified clear opportunities for economic development and diversification. These include the Gippsland Development Plan and the Directions for Latrobe Valley Transition Discussion Paper. Rather, the central difficulty for the Gippsland region has been developing clear priorities and coordinated action that will assist in job creation and attract investment,

particularly when the institutional infrastructure for regional governance remains unclear.

Even so, competing visions of change have developed over the same period. One strand focuses on the continuity of the area as a coal and energy centre, led by the power companies and many of Gippsland's regional development bodies. But another focus is on transition from a high to a low carbon economy. One notable advocate of this policy is the GTLC, a union confederation with 24 affiliated unions. The membership of 12 000 includes workers in heavy industry, mining, retail, hospitality, community care, health and education. The view of the GTLC is that a 'just transition' can be achieved for the region's workforce through well-informed policies that reflect the regional skills profile and the employment changes taking place in the region (GTLC, 2013; SNELL and FAIRBROTHER, 2012).

The 'just transition' vision came to inform much of the debate in the area and inform public policy into 2014. It originally underwrote the profile of the GTLC as the region began to re-establish itself in the early 2000s, following the traumas of the privatization period in the 1990s. The confederation was rebuilt by a small group of union leaders who focused on the possibilities of transition to a low carbon economy (FAIRBROTHER and TESTI, 2002).

The confederation executive argued for diversification and sustainability as the focus of regional development policy. This executive increasingly engaged with community activists, such as the Gippsland Climate Change Network, and was active in the LVTC (LVTC, 2012a; RDV, 2012a). The major report of the committee focused on implications of transition for workers in the area and called for cooperation between state, market and civil society actors. Specifically, the first recommendation of the report was that governments pay close attention to 'transitioning business and workers [...] ensuring workers and businesses affected by the economic transition have employment and business opportunities' (LVTC, 2012c, p. 4). A further recommendation of the report was that governments focus on 'ensuring governments, business, unions and other regional stakeholders work cooperatively' (p. 4).

Members of the executive, and particularly the secretary and the industry engagement officer, were members of a range of committees in the region concerned with regional revitalization, such as the Latrobe City's Low Carbon Transition Committee from 2011–13. The confederation developed its own vision of transition, informed by an understanding that action in relation to the displacement occasioned by deindustrialization usually occurs too late:

show me in the world where there's transition taking place? Always it's been the gate is shut first. Then they do regional development. What we want them to do is

regional development first before the chain goes on the gate.

(GTLC leader, 2012)

This leader, together with the executive, organized a series of awareness meetings from early 2009 onwards about transition, focusing on a variety of audiences: delegates, other union leaders, politicians, and then employers and representatives from other sectors in the region. Over a three-year period the GTLC sponsored four public events about socio-economic change and prospects. These events were also sponsored by the Latrobe City Council and RMIT University.

The primary purpose of these public events was to provide a forum in which to voice a diversity of views on regional development, particularly in response to debates about the Clean Energy Future legislation. The last, in April 2012, took place over two days, attended by well over 120 people, and had leading politicians in attendance as well as representatives from the major sectors, apart from oil and gas. As a forum it opened up discussion about opportunities, barriers and concerns regarding transition in the Latrobe Valley area and the broader Gippsland region (FAIRBROTHER *et al.*, 2012).

Thus the confederation sought to build partnerships within and between unions, as well as between unions and other industry-based groups in the region, such as the AGI. In this way, the GTLC has developed a vision of 'just transition' that has become part of a more general debate about the region's economic future. Through strategic engagement of the state and the community, the confederation reasserted its relevance to the governance of the Gippsland region, particularly in a moment of institutional uncertainty and economic transition.

#### *Assessment: strategies of regional development*

Over the past decade, governments in Australia have shaped institutions of regional governance in particular ways to present their own role as one of facilitation. The current regional development policy process is characterized by state and federal government commitment to establishing regional agencies, who are given the task of developing – though not implementing – strategies of social and economic change. This enables governments to demonstrate a commitment to social and economic capacity building at the regional level, even though empowered institutions of regional governance are absent. Such agencies typically involve partnerships between regional political and economic elites, reflecting particular sets of interests (BEER *et al.*, 2005; STATE GOVERNMENT OF VICTORIA, 2012b).

A further dimension of the facilitation role of state and federal governments is their active pursuit of private sector involvement in the development of

regional economies (RDV, 2012b). Because of this elevation of certain private interests within regional governance, governments claim that policies for regional development are robust, efficient and locally sensitive. The autonomy of regional development agencies in Gippsland is thus compromised on two fronts. First, state and federal governments endeavour to retain control over the implementation of policies. Second, certain private sector actors whose interests extend beyond the boundaries of the region often play a pivotal role in the policy development process. Hence regional governance in Gippsland is not as responsive to or representative of local concerns as is often claimed.

One way of shaping policy is to designate a 'region' in instrumental and strategic ways (MACKINNON, 2010). Indeed, governments at the state and federal level have deliberately focused on Gippsland, and particularly the Latrobe Valley area, as a 'region' at particular points in time. As the coal and energy hub of the state of Victoria, governments have promoted the Latrobe Valley area and the surrounding Gippsland 'region' as a potential manufacturing hub, where the skilled workforce of the coal and energy sector can be deployed and reskilled (FAIRBROTHER *et al.*, 2012). The corollary is that the distinctive prospects of other resources, such as agriculture and forestry/timber, could be overlooked. Thus consistent with the concept of 'scalar politics' (MACKINNON, 2010), 'regional development' can be invoked to advance particular projects and purposes. In this particular case, the state-supported regional development agencies of Gippsland have promoted a vision of regional development and change that reproduces existing institutionalized power relations and that does not necessarily reflect the diversity of perspectives in the region.

Reconfiguring the institutions of regional governance depends on situational and strategic capabilities. The GLGN as a designated body, established by the six councils that comprise the Gippsland region, remains a relatively 'toothless' agency (local resident, 29 March 2012). Thus, local councils continue to occupy the same space as the 'micromanaged' regional development agencies, with limited mandates that are ultimately subject to the agendas of the higher levels of government (BEER *et al.*, 2005). This is despite networks of local governments proving successful elsewhere in Australia, such as Cradle Coast Authority of Tasmania. The difference, however, is that the Cradle Coast Authority has been empowered through funding and decision-making authority (MCDONALD *et al.*, 2013). That the same has not been seen in the Gippsland region speaks to the complexity of its specific economic and political terrain.

In the leadership vacuum created by the absence of an empowered and legitimate regional voice, local political and economic elites have become the nominal leading voices in advocating policies for the region. In the case of Gippsland a relatively small cohort of

overlapping organizations claim to represent the 'voice' of the region, and they are able to do so because this voice is constructed with the support of state and federal governments. Not all actors in Gippsland are equally empowered to act as representatives of the region. Bodies that do claim representative status, such as the Committee for Gippsland and the LVTC, are neither open to all nor accountable to the broader public. This is compounded by the absence of genuinely participatory, accountable and empowered institutions of regional governance (BERGER, 2003).

Even so, marginalized local actors, such as trade unions, can emerge as place-based leaders in regions, since they are embedded within certain economic relationships and the community as a locality (FAIRBROTHER *et al.*, 2013). Via their overarching organizational forms, such as confederations, unions can bring a diverse range of constituents together and project their vision of the region upon the policy development process. Paradoxically, the depoliticized nature of government engagement may enable such alternative leadership. While public forums and debates serve to legitimate government-supported regional agencies, they also provide opportunities for alternative local agents to alter and shape the content of development policies, constraining the authority and agency of government actors who are often perceived as not working in the best interest of the region.

Ultimately, the ambiguities of regional political spaces open up the possibility that marginal or less prominent actors can influence and shape the institutions of regional governance and their development strategies. On the one hand, state and federal governments present policy as being shaped by external constraints, such as their limited mandate within a given region or the expectations of a market-based economy (BURNHAM, 2006). On the other hand, local agency clearly matters in understanding the complexities of place and how it is reproduced (MORGAN, 2014). The ways in which actors contribute to, play a part in or are marginalized by the processes of regional governance become a compelling focus for further research.

## CONCLUSIONS

The question of who speaks for a region is critical. Regional voice can be promoted via empowered regional institutional capacity as well as through decision-making forums that are created for the purpose of enabling participation by various groups and citizens. Governments remain critical, since they shape the institutional structures that often determine who can claim regional voice and how participation in the regional development process occurs. In doing so, they can either restrict or open spaces in which more marginalized voices can develop an alternative agenda.

Nonetheless, there is always scope for non-state actors to circumvent the institutional constraints they experience in relation to regional development processes. Regional actors have different capabilities, and the task they face is to create or recognize the conditions for strategic action. In the case of the local political and business elites of Gippsland, this was via the informal regional agencies established by state and federal governments. For those outside these arrangements, or who were deemed to represent sectional concerns, the critical action was to project an alternative vision of regional development, generated internally and with external actors.

Thus there always exist competing versions of change and transition strategies within the processes of regional development, involving different and often sectional groups. The case of Gippsland reveals that while state and federal governments set many of the terms of debate, organizations embedded within regions, such as trade unions, can gain traction by promoting alternative accounts of change that may eventually inform the construction of policy. This is an area where more research is required to explain how the strategic actions in which marginalized actors engage come to have an impact on institutional structures.

When considering the question of regional governance it is necessary to take into account the bases of resistance to dominant strategies of policy development. Marginalized groups may not necessarily engage in formal acts of resistance, preferring instead what they consider to be strategic participation in government-led public consultation and debate. The intervention of state actors in regional governance is central but uneven, with only certain interest groups and agendas afforded positions of influence with respect to policy and development strategy. But the form of regional governance and policy reflect more than the interaction between state actors and 'market forces'. Where the governance of regions occupies an ambiguous and uncertain space within formal state institutions, then opportunities exist for marginalized civil society actors to engage in contestation and reconstruction.

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