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# Is Municipal Cooperation a Silver Bullet?

## An Australian Perspective

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# AUSTRALIA



# Australian context

Federation: 'Commonwealth'; 6 States; 2 Territories:

- **Around 550 local governments, not recognised in Constitution**
- **Established under State/Territory laws (7 somewhat differing systems)**
- **Closely supervised, but can generally set their own agendas**

Commonwealth, States and NT dominate most major service delivery:

- **Education, health, water/sewerage, transport, police, economic development, emergency services, stadiums, cultural facilities**
- **Also strategic development planning (especially in metro regions)**
- **Key exceptions are water/sewerage in Queensland, Tasmania and non-metro New South Wales; transport and strategic planning in South East Queensland**

# Objectives and scope of cooperation

State dominance reduces needs for municipal cooperation:

- **Offsets metropolitan fragmentation**
- **Key issue tends to be 'vertical' State-local cooperation**

No 'burning platform' of financial problems:

- **Except in rural-remote areas, but grants lower the pressure**

Nevertheless cooperation is widespread:

- **Primary focus around efficiency (savings), avoiding mergers, effective advocacy**
- **Federal initiatives in 1970s, 1980s, 2000s; some State programs**
- **Shared services include waste, procurement, roads, regional planning/environment, tourism/economic development, libraries, IT, back-office functions, workforce skills**

# Mechanisms for cooperation

Wide variety of arrangements, within and between States:

- **Municipalities are often involved in several joint ventures**
- **Most arrangements are to varying degrees ad hoc**
- **Local government associations provide state-wide services**

NSW, Tasmania, South Australia and Western Australia all offer an *option* of statutory regional entities:

- **But State support is equivocal (some limits are imposed)**
- **And municipalities often prefer voluntary mechanisms beyond State control/intervention**
- **So there's nothing like Ontario's regions/counties or BC's regional districts**

Inter-government committees/boards both help and hinder

# Conclusions

There's no pressing need for a 'silver bullet'

But there is undoubtedly a need and benefits to be gained from more municipal cooperation:

- **Efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery**
- **Building capacity across the local government sector**
- **Assisting needy, under-resourced municipalities**
- **Improving State-local relations**

Some improved statutory options would help:

- **Voluntary, opt-in, opt-out culture is a barrier to progress**
- **However statutory mechanisms must achieve a better balance between consistency and durability on the one hand, and flexibility/adaptability/local choice on the other**